FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

NOV. 25c

featuring

THE GODS HATE KANSAS

a novel by

JOSEPH J. MILLARD

ANC

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

SAVE MONEY!
There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we are able to offer so much protection for so little money.

$100.00 A WEEK in CASH
PAID DIRECT TO YOU

FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

Policy Pays for a Day, a Week, a Month, a Year—*just as long as necessary for you to be hospitalized!*

JUST LOOK
The Large Benefit This Low Cost Policy Provides!

The Service Life Family Hospital Plan covers you and your family for about everything—for *every* accident, and for *all* common and rare diseases after the policy has been in force 30 days or more. Very serious disease such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart disease, diseases involving female organs, sickness resulting in a surgical operation, hernia, lumbago and sacroiliac conditions originating after the policy is in force six months are all covered . . . Hospitalization caused by attempted suicide, use of intoxicants or narcotics, insanity, and venereal disease is naturally excluded.

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your $1.00 a month!

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Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays $50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

POLIO

Benefits At No Extra Cost
In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
For Hospital Bills, up to $500.00
For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to $500.00
For Orthopedic Appliances, up to $500.00
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3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY
for this outstanding new Family Protection

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This is What $100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

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Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

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REMEMBER—$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY $14.25 PER DAY!

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The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

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Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

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SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
Assets of $13,188,604.16 as of January 1, 1951
Hospital Department J-17, Omaha 2, Nebraska

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No need to go out and sit and listen. Study WHEN you want and WHERE you want. Any time—no set hours. Do it when you feel like it—and get MORE out of I. C. S. training!

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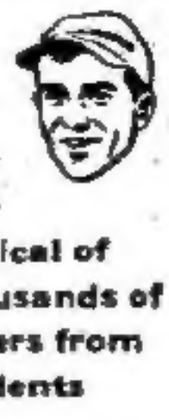

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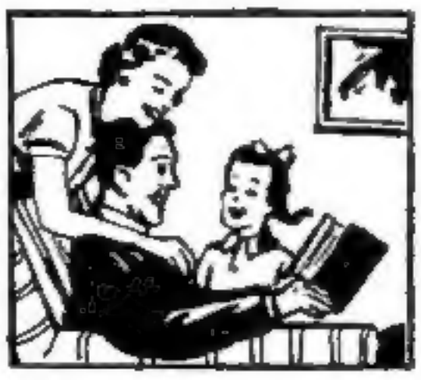
"The I. C. S. course marked a milestone in my career." J. R., Philadelphia, Pa.

BIGGER JOB, HIGHER PAY, HAPPIER FAMILY



All this comes from qualifying yourself for the job above. It takes training and skill. And the only place you can get them is out of yourself. Do something to make training and skill your allies.

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FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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VOL. 4, No. 3
NOVEMBER, 1952

A Book-Length Science Fiction Classic

THE GODS HATE KANSAS . . . . . **JOSEPH J. MILLARD** **10**
Eleven meteors from outer space hurtled the black gulf between the stars—and brought astonishing new menace to all Mankind!

A New Novelet

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He had a lovely neighbor—who apparently came from the century after tomorrow—but she pulled down the blinds on the future!

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It was much more than a vicious circle—it was a vicious square

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Ciava ruled the twilight people till Theseus came out of night

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It was a case of—"Rust thou art, and to rust returneth. . . ."

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Cover Painting by EARLE K. BERGEY

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N. L. PINES, *Publisher*; **FANNY ELLSWORTH**, *Managing Editor*
ED ROFHEART, *Art Director*; **SAMUEL MINES**, *Editor*

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A DEPARTMENT WHERE SCIENCE FICTION READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

LAST summer ye ed had his first skirmish with fandom en masse at the Fan-Vet conference in New York. Nothing earth-shaking came of this brush and little blood was drawn, so there was no mad rush to report significant findings to you. But in the interval, certain ideas have come out of it which possibly bear recording for what they are worth.

We were asked to make a short speech at the convention, which we did. We said we were happy to be there and sat down. This wasn't even entirely true at the time it was said, we weren't at all sure yet we were glad to be there. But as the mayhem proceeded we got gladder and gladder; we observed that the assembled multitudes were having a fine time, even laughing at our jokes. Greater love hath no fan.

As part of a panel with other editors we answered questions from the floor. This business in a science fiction convention is unique. So far as I know, no other editors set themselves up as willing targets for their readers, defend their policies, explain their motives or parry the most intimate questions about their private lives. Not that we begrudge the fans their fun. If anything it is a healthy condition, keeping things out in the open, and the ducking of too persistent questions, is good training for an editor, developing very fancy footwork.

The interesting conclusion to all this is that in no other field do readers feel as identified with the magazine, as vitally interested in all that concerns it, or as much "part owner."

We admit to being disappointed in the questions asked. They were the same questions as have appeared over and over in the letter columns and which we, naive soul, thought we were answering each time. Questions like: Why do you have goils on the covers? When is FANTASTIC going bi-monthly? (we answered that one all right.) Why don't you print the *real* old stories, written in medieval English? Why don't you use the old Paul covers from Gernsback days instead of the new stuff? Why don't you leave all the stories out and just run letters? Why don't you have more stories by (a) Bradbury, (b) Heinlein, (c) van Vogt, (d) Herman Schlepperdingel?

When this barrage was over we requested permission to ask a question ourselves and requested the fans to tell us why those who wrote the toughest and most insulting letters and then came up to the office to pay us a visit (and ask for free art work, manuscripts, typewriters, our tie clasp, wrist watch or what have you) invariably turned out to be small scared fans about 14 years old?

We were working strictly for laughs, but somewhat to our surprise were answered seriously and with admirable objectivity by David Ish who suggested that the small meek fan was doing a helluva lot of compensating by cutting loose with his typewriter to make an important noise. Drunk with power at seeing his name in print, he was monarch of all he derided.

True, true. A typewriter often takes the place of the well-known "blunt instrument" made famous in murder stories.

We came away from the Fan-Vet convention feeling rather warm about it all. The sense of identification gets across after all, and as the fans identify themselves with the magazine and its personality, so in the long run do we become identified with the fans. Let's face it, it's Nature!

LETTERS FROM READERS

REMEMBER the old days when FSM had no letter column? I don't—Merwin had 'em. Ah, days of ease. These days we get letters. And the first letter we're printing this

(Continued on page 140)

KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

AMENHOTEP IV
Founder of Egypt's
Mystery Schools

This Sealed Book—FREE

Has life brought you that personal satisfaction, the sense of achievement and happiness that you desire? If not, it is your duty to yourself to learn about this rational method of applying natural laws for the mastery of life. To the thoughtful person it is obvious that everyone cannot be entrusted with an intimate knowledge of the mysteries of life, for everyone is not capable of properly using it. But if you are one of those possessed of a true desire to forge ahead and wish to make use of the subtle influences of life, the Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) will send you A Sealed Book of explanation without obligation. This Sealed Book tells how you, in the privacy of your own home, without interference with your personal affairs or manner of living, may receive these secret teachings. Not weird or strange practices, but a rational application of the basic laws of life. Use the coupon, and obtain your complimentary copy.

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OPIUM SMUGGLERS MEET THEIR MATCH WHEN...

THE "JUNKS" IN THE SPARE ALL RIGHT. WHAT NOW?

PASS 'EM THROUGH. I'LL FOLLOW THEM HOME

HOMEWARD BOUND AFTER A DAY AT TIJUANA, SENATOR BLAIK AND HIS DAUGHTER STOP AT THE BORDER FOR ROUTINE CUSTOM INSPECTION...

OPIUM? IN MY CAR? PREPOSTEROUS! I'M SENATOR BLAIK!

YOU'RE BEING USED BY OPIUM SMUGGLERS, SENATOR. LET ME SHOW YOU

AMAZING! YOU SAY THEY PUT IT IN THE TIRE AT THAT PARKING LOT?

EXACTLY! AND TONIGHT THE GANG AT THIS END WILL TRY TO NAB IT. MAY I USE YOUR 'PHONE?

THAT'S THAT. WELL, YOU FOLKS HAVE YOUR DINNER. I'LL BE BACK ABOUT NIGHTFALL

WHY NOT STAY AND HAVE A SNACK WITH US?

SURE. COME UPSTAIRS AND FRESHEN UP

MIND IF I SHAVE, SIR? I'VE BEEN ON DUTY SINCE DAWN

CERTAINLY. HERE'S A RAZOR

THIS BLADE SURE MAKES SHORT WORK OF WHISKERS. MY FACE FEELS GREAT!

I'M SOLD ON THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING

PUT UP YOUR HANDS AND NO FUNNY BUSINESS!

THE FEDS!

LATE THAT NIGHT

SO THIS TIME TOMORROW I'LL BE HEADING EAST ON THE "SUPER-CHIEF"

THAT'S WONDERFUL! WE'LL BE ON THE SAME TRAIN!

HE'S HANDSOME

WHEN YOU'RE OUT TO GET QUICK, EASY SHAVES AT A SAVING, THIN GILLETTES ARE JUST YOUR DISH. YOU CAN'T FIND ANOTHER LOW-PRICE BLADE SO KEEN AND LONG-LASTING. THIN GILLETTES ARE MADE FOR YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR... FIT EXACTLY AND PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT 10-BLADE PACKAGE

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DOING *Something* About It!

"Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody ever does anything about it." — **Mark Twain**

DURING the recent drought in Australia, the worst in its history, hundreds of bush natives committed ritual suicide to appease the absent Rain Spirit. According to their lights, they were at least *doing* something about the weather, not just "talking about it." And to a surprising extent, scientists all over the world are doing something about the weather too.

In Boston, for instance, a two-day Symposium on Climatic Change went into the question of what kind of weather people really need.

To really do much about the weather, more must be known about it; and such knowledge is being rapidly gained through numerous studies, surveys, experiments and theories.

Dr. H. C. Willett, Professor of Meteorology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, believes that solar eruptions and sunspots may influence long-period weather, and that long range predictions on the weather of an entire season may soon be possible. Scientists of the same Institute have just completed a two-year series of daily weather maps of the entire southern hemisphere, which may make long range weather forecasting more accurate. The maps tend to confirm that the Antarctic is much more potent than the Arctic in influencing the world's weather.

This seems to jibe pretty well with a recent report at a meeting of the American Meteorological Society, which asserts that monsoons pushing against the high Himalayas, and air masses moving over Asia, exert sufficient force to tilt the axis of the earth. In fact, they keep the North Pole moving in a flat circle, twenty feet in diameter!

As for hurricanes, experiments are now being made to spot and track them over the oceans by seismograph. Dr. Florence Van Straten, U. S. Navy meteorologist, is trying to iron out the main bug, which is that stormy waves hitting the beaches register much the same on the seismograph as the hurricane itself.

Prediction and possible control of the weather is important in peace or in war. The Defense department, however, closed down its "Project Cirrus," as of July 1. Their research showed conclusively that either dry ice or silver iodide crystals would make people down below reach for their umbrellas; but conditions had to be exactly right, and a cloud handy.

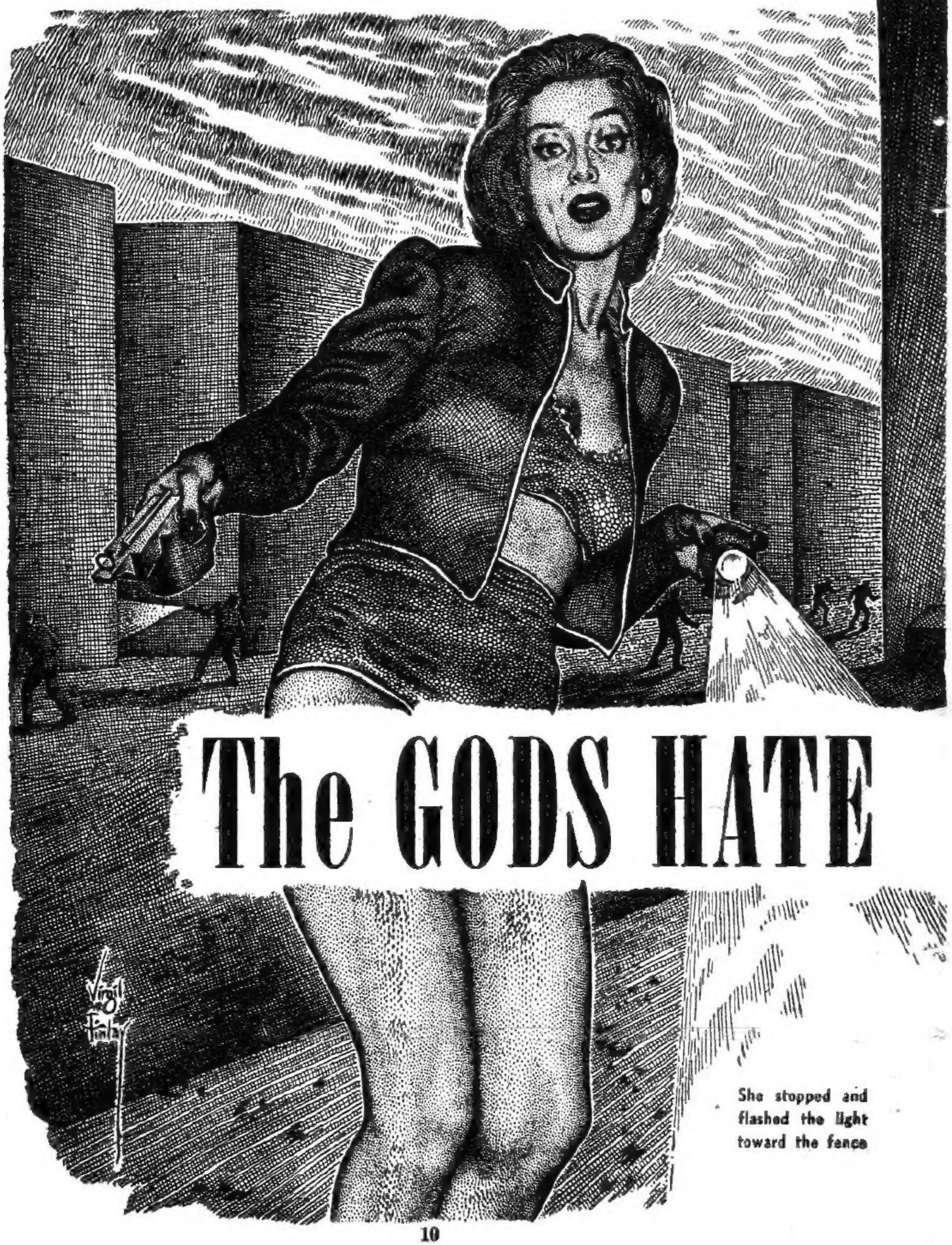
Still, there is much encouragement. According to Johns Hopkins Magazine, a recent development at the Seabrook frozen food farms is the biggest thing in agriculture "since the tractor displaced the horse." Dr. Thornwaite, director of their Laboratory of Climatology, has invented a climate-calendar based on "growth units." Each unit of growth needs a certain water-temperature ratio, and plants accumulate more units in June, for instance, than in March.

Weather forecasters may soon have "dishpan hands," however, if experiments by Dr. Dave Fultz of Chicago University "pan out." By setting the water in a dishpan whirling, with specks of aluminum powder making the currents visible, Dr. Fultz is able to test the effect of solar heat, cold polar air, mountain ranges, and the like, on the patterns formed by a circulating fluid. These, of course, resemble the high pressure and low pressure areas and prevailing winds upon which weather prediction is based.

No, Mark Twain couldn't say it today.

—*Lewis Island*

Eleven meteors from Outer Space hurtled the black gulf between the stars . . . and brought menace to Mankind!



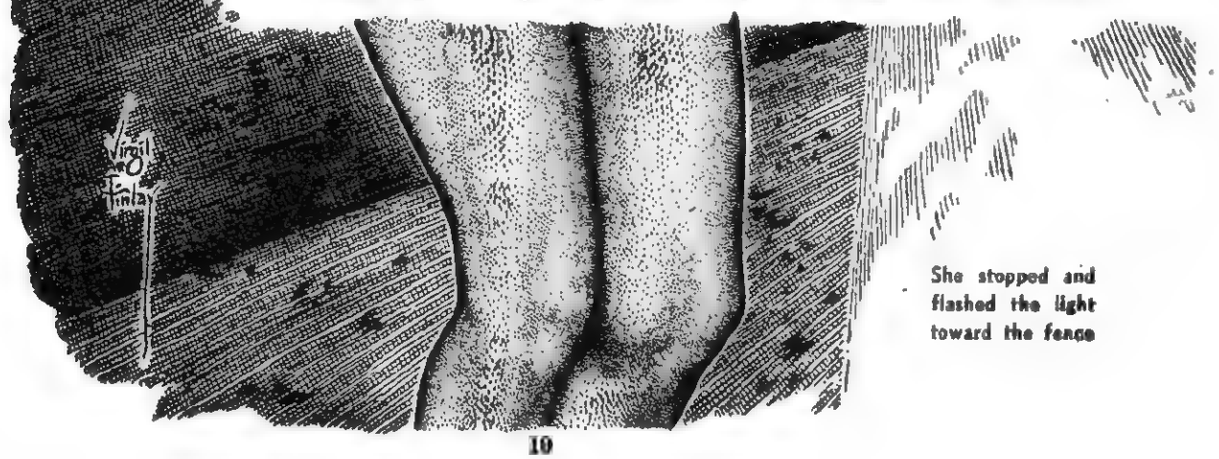
The GODS HATE

She stopped and flashed the light toward the fence

Eleven meteors from Outer Space hurtled the black gulf between the stars . . . and brought menace to Mankind!

The GODS HATE KANSAS

A Novel by JOSEPH J. MILLARD



She stopped and flashed the light toward the fence

I

THE rocks had been hurtling toward earth for more than a week, silent and invisible in the black, airless void of space. There was something dogged in the way the eleven dark chunks of stone clustered together, neither drawing apart nor touching, maintaining always that odd arrow-head formation as the tens of thousands of trackless miles whipped by.

And there was something vaguely sinister in their majestic progress, moving an unvarying nineteen miles a second, ignoring the billions of fragments of meteoric dust that fled past them at vastly greater speeds. They were some-

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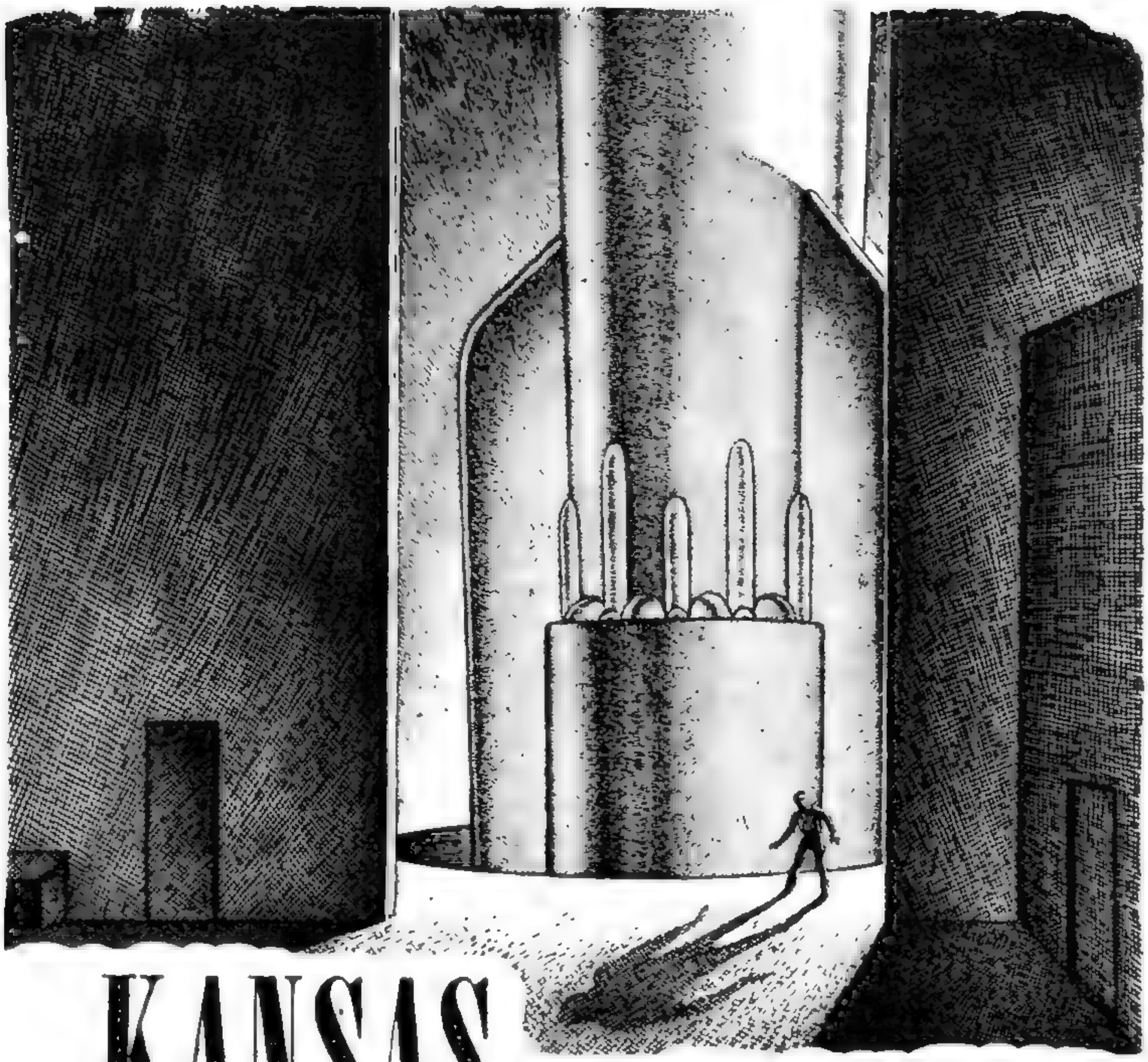

KANSAS

A Novel by JOSEPH J. MILLARD

I

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how like messengers dispatched upon some dark mission, their progress timed to carry them to an infinitely distant rendezvous at exactly the appointed time.

The rocks were close to Earth, still invisible, but feeling the first gentle tug of Earth's gravitation, when Gus Solle finished his night's chores. He stripped the last ounce of milk into the brimming pail, hung the milk stool on a peg, and got down the coal-oil lantern from its hook above the cow stalls.

At the barn door he paused, waiting for two other flickering lanterns to join him.

Young Gus, his twenty-year-old son, came striding from the dark shadows of the horse barn at the rear, slapping loose straw from his overalls. Arnie Cole, the hired man, pumped a last groaning gush of water into the stock tank, picked up his own lantern, and joined them as they moved toward the house.

"Supper's ready!" The gaunt figure of Martha Solle appeared in the doorway of the house to make the announcement, her big frame silhouetted by the kerosene lamp on a table at her back. "Set the milk in the shanty and separate it afterwards. It'll keep, but supper won't."

Gus Solle grunted acknowledgment as the three men moved up the barren ground toward the frame house.

"If you figure on working old Mag tomorrow, Pa," young Gus remarked, "you better throw a pad under her collar. She's got a bad gall from the hame strap."

"Ain't much sense in working any of the horses," Arnie Cole growled, "unless we get some rain purty soon. The more I see of Kansas the more I wish I'd never left Iowa."

"We could use a drop or two," Gus Solle admitted. "Don't seem to be a cloud in sight, neither. I like the stars but I'm getting mighty sick of seeing 'em night after night when the land's burning up for a good rain."

He squinted up at the unbelievably brilliant panorama of the cloudless night sky with anger in his mild face. Unconsciously, the other two turned their faces up toward the heavens to follow his gaze. His wife, waiting in the doorway, also looked up to see what the men-folk were staring at.

SO IT happened that four pairs of eyes saw the rocks at the precise instant when, some eighty-seven miles up into the night, they first flamed to brilliance in the clutch of tenuous atmosphere.

"Look!" Martha Solle cried. "Shooting stars—a tribe of 'em, looks like."

"Meteors, Ma," young Gus corrected with the superiority of one who had been to school in town. "A meteor swarm."

There was no more time for speech. What had been only a leisurely glide through outer space became, in relation to Earth speeds, a screaming flight. In two seconds, the eleven separate bodies of rock could be resolved by the eye, and the scream of their coming had reached ahead to torment the ears.

In three seconds, the eleven rocks had leaped beyond the apparent size of baseballs and their brilliance was incredibly dazzling. Now the scream had deepened to a rushing roar, interspersed by thunderous explosions as two of the eleven rocks succumbed to the Titanic forces of kinetic energy and burst apart in mid-air.

In four seconds, the sound of their passage was beyond description. The Solles and Arnie Cole stood frozen as nine flaming rocks, now bigger than basket balls, seemed to hurtle straight toward their defenseless house. All saw the largest rock in front, with the eight others arrowed out in two streams behind, sweeping down in a vast arc.

Then, miraculously, the rocks were overhead, passing above them and above the low house, sweeping on in a screaming thunder of awful sound to plunge into the dusty wheat field beyond. Air, searing hot and violently churning, smote their upturned faces, scorching

the breath from their lungs.

The nine rocks struck and vanished in a welter of flame and mushrooming dust. The sound became something too terrible for human ears to measure. The ground underfoot rocked to the impact and a fresh wave of super-heated air surged out from the point of contact, and swept the four stunned humans from their feet.

Then silence fell, a silence that was broken only by the faint patter of infinitesimal particles of exploded rocks against house and earth.

"Martha!" Gus Solle was the first to recover his senses and clamber onto shaky legs. "Martha, are you all right?"

They all moved then, climbing dazedly to their feet, mumbling assurances.

"Come on!" young Gus cried shrilly, his own voice sounding faint against shattered eardrums. "They landed right there on the edge of the north forty. I'm going over there!"

"Wait—be careful!" Martha Solle warned. "One of them things might explode. I wouldn't go near if I was you."

"Hell with that noise!" young Gus cried excitedly. "I'm going to find 'em and dig 'em all out. Them things are worth money. Pete Halvorsen found just a little chunk of an old meteor on his place a couple years ago and some guys straight from Washington give him fifty dollars for it. I bet there's a couple hundred dollars' worth, at least, right there waiting for us! Come on!"

They all went then, running and stumbling across the parched earth toward the fresh scars that lay plain under the starlight. The thought of money drove all fear from their minds.

In the wheat field, the things lay quietly in their shallow pits—waiting. . . .

Alien Invasion

"The Gods Hate Kansas" is a story which happens to stand up particularly well. This would be reason enough to reprint it for those who never read it. In addition, it has a peculiar attraction to us of anticipating a theme which has been widely imitated in recent years by several science fiction writers. This is the theme of the grim and alien invasion from space. Invaders are non-human. They are parasitic. They attach themselves to humans and ride their hosts like a horde of menacing "old men of the sea."

With minor variations this story has appeared several times in the past few years. You have probably read one or more versions of it. See how Millard's old classic compares. We found it still alive, still dramatic, still full of the menace and suspense which makes a good story!

—The Editor

THE spring sunlight lay warm on the fresh green of Culwain University campus. Curtis Temple felt the tingle of it through the narrow bandage on the back of his head and made a mental note to spend as much time as possible with his head exposed to that radiance. It would speed the healing of his wound.

He went across the campus, a tall well-knit young man in rough tweeds with a pleasantly angular face and level gray eyes. There was still a glow of deep bronze on his skin, despite the traces of hospital pallor, and his rangy stride was definitely a product of open spaces. It was hard to believe that this athlete could be Curtis Temple, Ph.D., professor of Astrophysics at Culwain, and rated tops in that vast new field of scientific adventure.

It was adventure that had drawn Temple to this phase of universal research, the thrill of searching unknown spaces, of charting the uncharted, seeing the unseen, fitting the complexities of the Infinite into a laboratory pattern. And it was love of adventure that had sent him soaring skyward in a free balloon on the ill-fated cosmic ray search that had nearly cost him his life.

The failure of the balloon that confined him to the hospital for weary months had left him with a shattered skull. It was only now that, thanks to medical genius, he was out and able to walk and work and feel the warmth of the sunlight on his bared head.

He went into the shadowy interior of the astronomical observatory crouching under its silvery dome on a corner of the campus, and entered the laboratory. Mullane, the wizened little gnome of an astronomer, was in there, absorbed in a delicate radiance experiment. He was unaware of Temple's entrance until the needle on a dial before him began to dip and flicker madly.

Mullane laid down his pencil with a mock sigh of despair and snapped off the switch.

"Don't look now," he whispered loudly, addressing the bare wall, "but that man's here again—the one with the tin head."

Temple chuckled and strolled over to kibitz at Mullane's notes. The two were old friends and associates.

"It's lucky for you I'd just finished," Mullane growled, grinning with his eyes. "Every time that silvery skull of yours gets near the coils, my indicators run wild. I ought to tell the F.B.I. about it. How is your head, anyway, and how much longer do you have to wear that silver plate screwed to your skull bone, Curt?"

"Not long, and it really isn't a plate. It's a sort of fine-mesh silver screen that Doc put in to hold the broken pieces of my skull in place until they knit. I'm actually as good as new right now but Doc wants to leave the silver in for another few weeks. I don't mind. The scar is almost healed, and I never feel the screen any more."

"Too bad you weren't able to go with the group the University sent down to Kansas to study that metorite swarm. Meteors are your specialty, Curt, and it isn't once in a century that a big fall like that occurs before witnesses so it can be located and studied while still fresh. Even if nebulae are my specialty, I'd like to have gone there, myself."

Temple's face clouded momentarily.

"Missing that did hurt," he admitted, "but somebody had to carry on the classes here and I'm still technically a cripple. I can't really kick, though. I'm getting photos, samples and complete reports every day and it's my one line of study the group is following. After all, Lee is there—and she's my eyes and ears on the expedition."

Mullane grinned and winked broadly.

"And your heart, too?" he asked slyly.

Curt Temple reddened and then laughed.

"Okay, granny snoop, my heart, too. So what? With all the prying you do into my affairs, it's a wonder you ever get a moment off to look through your telescope."

"I don't," Mullane admitted placidly. "I leave that job to the camera and keep my eyes on you. Tch! Tch! How scandalous! Seriously though, Curt, Lee Mason is every bit as intelligent as she is beautiful—and that's going some. Why, that master's thesis she did on the oscillatory determinative of extra-galactic cathodic emissions was a wonder. But I'm warning you—if you marry her you lose the finest assistant any research man ever had. Why, that girl—"

He broke off as the telephone whirred, answered the call, then handed over the instrument. "For you, Curt. Our prexie himself calling, no less."

II

WONDERING, Temple accepted the phone. The usually precise accents of

McCabe, Culwain U's president, were ragged.

"Professor Temple, I—I think you'd better get over to my office right away. Something has occurred, something that —well it concerns our Kansas expedition."

The cold fingers of a nameless fear tightened suddenly around Curtis Temple's heart.

"Our field group!" he exclaimed. "What's hap—"

"The field group," President McCabe said thickly, "has disappeared—vanished with all their luggage and equipment."

"Disappeared? Lee—Miss Mason—what about her?"

McCabe's answer was like a phonograph with its needle stuck in one groove.

"The field group"—even his tone was the same—"has disappeared. Vanished with all their luggage."

When Temple burst into his office five minutes later, McCabe's face was as white as his beard, his eyes red-veined and dazed.

"What do you mean—disappeared?" Temple shouted, before the college president could speak. "People don't just disappear off the face of the earth. What happened to them? Where did they go? Are you hiding something?"

McCabe waved a trembling hand toward a chair and hunched over the desk, gnawing at his beard.

"Of course people don't disappear," he said finally. "But they did—nine persons, five heavy trucks, tons of instruments and supplies, tools and equipment and the six portable shacks. Last night, when I talked to them by phone, everything was going perfectly. When I called back this morning to give them some data they requested, there was nothing left but the marks where camp had been—and the meteors."

"The meteors!" Temple gasped. "You mean they went off and left the—the very object of their trip?"

"They left several tons of distinctly *un*portable rock," McCabe admitted. "But I'm afraid they didn't just 'go off and leave them' in the sense you mean. The sheriff and fifty deputies have been scouring the country since morning without finding a wheel track or a trace of them. Nor have they found anyone who saw or heard the caravan pass in the night, though every road out of camp led through towns."

"But—but they must have gone *somewhere!*"

"Obviously," McCabe agreed drily. "The puzzle is where and how. And I might add a third element of mystery—why?"

Curtis Temple stared, feeling the blood drain out of his face. He was just beginning fully to realize the sheer impossibility of what had been told him.

He knew the layout of the meteor camp as well as he knew the paths across Culwain campus, for most of it was of his own design. Five of the shacks were small, square, sheet-iron affairs, sleeping quarters for the force. Lee Mason occupied one alone.

The eight men shared the other four. The sixth shack was really two shacks built together, housing the photographic darkroom, the chemistry lab, the instruments for physical analysis, and cubbyholes in which the researchers performed their calculations.

These shacks and all they contained were built to be carried on four trucks. The fifth truck bore the portable generating unit for camp light and power, the kitchen equipment and rough tools. Usually a day and a half were required to break camp and pack for moving.

WHILE it was conceivable that the nine members could completely dismantle and pack the camp overnight, it would take some inhuman driving urge to make the miracle possible. Curtis Temple's imagination tried to supply a suggestion of what such driving urge might be and failed utterly to conjure up anything but a black cloud of unnamable terror.

"The—the neighbors," he managed at last. "Someone must have seen or heard something. Someone *must* have!"

"Maybe someone did. The only ones closer than the town of Bomer, two miles away, were those farmers who saw the meteors fall and reported to us. There was a man and his wife, their grown son, and a hired man. Our camp was on their land, about a hundred yards from their house, right on the site of the meteor pits. The two Solles and their hired man were helping the field crew on heavy work and Mrs. Solle was cooking for the camp."

"They must know what happened," Temple said eagerly.

"Perhaps they do," McCabe whispered, without looking up. "Undoubtedly they do. But they've vanished, too—all four of them—at the same time, in the same way."

Temple closed his eyes, seeing a vision of Lee Mason's lovely face with its frame of wheat-gold hair, hearing again the gay tinkle of her ready laughter and the soft music of her voice. The vision was like a knife turning around and around in his heart.

"Either," McCabe gritted, tightening his fists, "it's a gigantic hoax of some kind, or—"

"Or," Temple finished flatly, "the gods still hate Kansas."

"Eh?" McCabe stared blankly.

"You've heard my remark that the gods must hate Kansas because they throw so many stones at it. You were in class the day I used that expression. Maybe it sounded facetious, but it wasn't meant to be, because behind it lies a mystery that has puzzled me and every other astronomer for years—a mystery that rivals any puzzle science ever unearthed."

"I—don't think I follow you, sir."

"Look." Temple leaned forward earnestly. "You know there are, roughly, two kinds of meteorites—stone and iron. Some twenty million of them enter Earth's atmosphere every twenty-four hours, although few of them reach Earth without being consumed by friction with air. We think we know what meteors are—cosmic dust, the wreckage of shattered planets, or comets burst apart in space. We think space is full of these fragments, that we're constantly meeting them, burning them up in our upper atmosphere or letting an occasional large one get through to earth. That sounds logical, but is it? If that were the true answer, then by all the laws of probability the meteors that do fall should be pretty evenly distributed over the face of Earth, shouldn't they?"

"Of course," McCabe admitted dazedly. "But I don't see—"

TEMPLE drilled on. "They should be. But they aren't. The United States is struck by almost as many meteorites as all the rest of the world put together. But the real mystery lies in stony meteorites, like the swarm that just struck in Kansas. *Why* did they land in Kansas?"

"Why—why, I suppose they just happened to."

"Did they? Listen! Kansas isn't a big state, but a third of all stone meteorites ever known to strike in North America landed in little Kansas. One-sixth of all the stone recorded on Earth struck Kansas. More stone meteorites land in Kansas than in any other state in the Union—more than in any other two states west of the Mississippi. The largest stone meteorite ever known landed there. The largest of the rare Pallasite stones, as well, struck Kansas.

"But that isn't all. Scott County, Kansas, is the only place on Earth where meteors ever struck twice in the same place. More meteoric falls have been actually witnessed in Kansas than anywhere else in the world. Two of the thirteen rarest meteor types known in North America were found within the borders of Kansas."

"Why," McCabe said feebly, "that's utterly fantastic!"

"You bet it is—but it's brutal fact. Ask Mullane, Dawson, any astronomer,

The lava dust exploded in a burst of livid flame

or read Nininger's book on meteorites for a complete dated record of known falls. It's fantastic, but it's been happening for centuries, and there must be a reason! The disappearance of the meteor expedition is fantastic, too, but again there's got to be a reason.

"The landing of nine huge stony meteorites, traveling in a perfect V-formation is fantastic. The expedition has been measuring the impact pits, scurrying around to cross-examine witnesses to the fall, getting a complete picture of the direction and velocity of the swarm. I've just assembled their data and the results are even more fantastic."

McCabe wet his lips and blinked dazedly.

TEMPLE hurriedly strode across and pounded a hard fist on the president's desk.

"Do you know what those figures revealed? That meteor swarm was traveling somewhere between seventeen and twenty miles a second, far slower than the average meteor velocity. And unless the figures are wrong—they came from the Moon!"

"The Moon!" McCabe parroted. "But I don't see the connection between that and our lost group."

"I don't either!" Temple barked. "But I'm leaving for Kansas tonight and if there *is* a connection, I'll find it if I have to tear the whole Universe apart!"

III

FIVE days earlier, the meteor expedition had arrived at the location of the fall with high hopes and intense enthusiasm. There was a world of bitter, back-breaking work to be done, but none of the nine persons in the group had any thought for the labor involved.

For the first time, a sizable meteoric fall had occurred before witnesses in the midst of habitable country. For the first time, age-old cosmic secrets might be revealed before relentless Time had hidden them from the searching eyes of curious man.

First of all, there was the camp itself to be set up. The Solles and their hired man were employed on the spot to help with the manual labor.

The shacks were ranged in two facing rows, alternating the parked trucks to form a short street. At the north end of this street, the laboratory shack was erected. This was actually two of the smaller shacks built together to house the instruments, equipment and benches.

Beside the laboratory was the focus of interest and activity, the great roped-off area of impact craters where the nine closely bunched aerolites had burrowed into the earth. Beyond casting longing, wistful eyes at the craters, no one touched the sacred section until the last shack was up and in place, the last instrument set, the last wire and tube connected and ready for the vital task ahead.

Although the meteorites themselves lay only a few feet below the surface, it was five days before any attempt was made to uncover or lift them from their graves. A dozen vital tasks, many of them suggested by Curtis Temple in planning the expedition, must come first.

There was the problem of learning from what part of space the visitors had come. That involved interviewing everyone who had glimpsed the fierce flame of the rocks before impact, sifting a welter of faulty memories, optical errors and vague guesses to ferret out the fragments of fact.

Farmer Olson had seen the fireballs over his cowbarn roof; Banker Simms, through his bedroom window; a young country schoolteacher, ten miles west, was sure they came from right up *there*.

The Solles could not agree on which of three widely separated constellations overhead had seemed to frame the first faint sparks.

No matter how insignificant, each fact was weighed and judged and fitted, at last, into the growing composite picture of the great swarm's path through the atmosphere from its radiant point. When the path was finally charted and found to coincide with the angle of impact suggested by the craters, there was rejoicing in the camp, and the mathematicians went to work.

There was work for all sciences. Chemistry attacked the rims of the craters, analyzing the soil content and composition, estimating the amount of heat generated by impact and from that, the possible velocity of the rocks.

Bacteriology probed the scorched earth in fruitless search for signs of living organisms sloughed off during passage. Physics ranged the wheat field, striking the baked prairie with carefully-measured blows to compute its surface resistance to impact.

Pop-eyed visitors came from counties around to gape at the spectacle. Bored reporters drifted in, snapped dull shots and went away, still bored.

The evening of the fifth day everyone stood in the circle of light from portable floods and watched the first and largest of the nine aerolites glide up over the rim of its pit, drawn by windlass on the power truck.

Arnie Cole and the Solles, father and son, guided the cables and steadied the wood beams that served as track for the heavy rock. Dr. Eno Rocossen, chief

astronomer and head of the group, supervised the job, hovering over the dingy chunk of cosmic debris as solicitously as a mother hen over her chick.

THERE was a concerted rush to examine the basket-ball-sized alien as it came to rest beside the lab shack. Lee Mason, on her knees beside Jacobs, the chemist, fingered the fused surface of the aerolite in frowning bewilderment.

"I've examined a lot of siderites, siderolites and aerolites," she said finally, "but never one quite like this. It obviously isn't an iron or an iron-stone, yet it seems to lack the chondritic structure of a true stone. And I've never seen anything like that hard, pitchy coating over one before. Jake, when are you going to start an analysis test? I have a feeling you'll run into a completely unique chemical constitution. I wish Curt could have been here to see this!"

Jacobs grinned and reached for a geologist's hammer.

"We all miss Curt—but not for the same reason, Lonely Heart. Here, let's crack off a few chips and run a test on them right now. I'm as curious as you are. We'll try some simple ones tonight, then start a test for occluded gases first thing in the morning."

"Wait!" Lee Mason's hand on the chemist's arm halted the first hammer blow. "When your arm threw a shadow, just then . . . Jake, switch off the lights a moment."

As swift darkness followed the click of the switch, a concerted murmur rose.

"Radioactive!" Lee exclaimed. "I thought I saw a faint, greenish glow in the shadow. Can you beat that? Our meteorite *is* unique. Other stonys have only been about a fourth as radioactive as ordinary terrestrial granite, which isn't much."

"Looks like we found something, all right," Jacobs assented excitedly, lifting the hammer. "Well, here goes for a sample. I'll chip off some for your spectroscope tests, too— Why, what's wrong with you, Lee?"

On her knees, Lee Mason was swaying dizzily, her lovely face drawn into a tight, startled frown. She shook her head dazedly, after a moment, and her face cleared.

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess, Jake. Just for a moment I had the oddest sensation—a sort of cold dread at the thought of chipping the covering on the stone. But I'm all right, now. Go ahead and crack our egg."

Jacobs touched her pale forehead without feeling the glow of fever, frowned, shrugged and turned back to his task.

"Sump'n you et, most likely," he said lightly. "Watch where the chips fly, Lee. We can't afford to waste a single grain."

AN HOUR later, the entire expedition crowded into the small laboratory for the first rough analysis tests. Scientific curiosity ran at too high a pitch for anyone to think of sleep that night. Fragments chipped from the stones waited in nine labeled envelopes to tell their hidden stories to the ears of science.

Dr. Eno Rocossen finished polishing his spectacles and took out the contents of the first envelope.

"Jameson, you go ahead with a micro examination of both sheath and matrix, using this little chip here. Kinsell, you help Jacobs on the—"

He stopped speaking, blinked dazedly and passed a trembling hand across his forehead. The precious bits of aerolite dribbled out of his lax palm, unheeded. He gripped the lab bench hard, leaning on it as though for support.

"Doctor," Lee cried in sudden alarm, starting forward, "are you ill?"

He straightened, waving her back. His ascetic face regained its composure. Only his eyes seemed different—flat and empty.

"No," he said in an oddly changed voice. "No, I'm quite all right. I've made the connection now. It—it's a bit confusing for a few moments but that passes almost immediately. You may all

take hold."

During a moment of dead silence, all eyes stared incredulously, wonderingly. There was no sense in the doctor's words, but there was something vaguely menacing in their hidden import. Lee Mason gaped in horror, wondering if the great man had suddenly gone mad.

Then a disturbance across the room caught her gaze. The chubby physicist, Lansdon, was stumbling toward Rocossen, a strange expression on his moon face.

He halted and his hands moved feebly in a vague salute.

"Yes," he said oddly, "it is dizzying at first. You—you're Bhazh, aren't you? I'm Tas II."

Beside Lee, the gaunt, sardonic Jacobs, whose name ranked second to none in knowledge of star chemistry, bowed low.

"And here is Gniz, oh mighty Bhazh!"

Lee Mason gaped in bewilderment and sank down weakly on the nearest bench.

"It couldn't be that everybody here has gone crazy except me," she said to herself. "It must be that they're all sane and I've gone crazy so the sane things they say and do sound like crazy things to my crazy mind. It *must* be that! Oh, Lord, I wonder if Curt'll come and visit me in the asylum."

She stiffened abruptly and a sharp exclamation burst from her lips. Like a dash of ice water, something infinitely cold touched and clung to the base of her skull. She slapped at it, tried to brush it away, but her hand met nothing except the soft cloud of her hair.

Lee tried to rise, but her strength refused the task. The thing on her neck was burrowing, digging incredibly icy tentacles through flesh and skull bone and deep into the matter of her brain. She tried to scream, but no sound would come.

Then the icy finger touched some unknown sensitive spot, deep in her brain and a swift stab of utter agony lanced through every nerve in her body. It was like a dentist's drill touching the raw nerve of a tooth, only worse—a hundred times worse. The agony died, and with it went her senses.

Lee Mason rose stiffly, turned and bowed low toward Dr. Eno Rocossen. Her voice came stiffly, woodenly.

"Vrag is connected, Great Bhazh. You have succeeded in all things, beyond the greatest vision of our master."

Dr. Eno Rocossen, whose prim figure was familiar to every astronomical group and conference and society in the world, grinned like a satyr and pounded his breast.

"Of course," he acknowledged. "Did I not promise that it would come to pass? And am I not Bhazh—Bhazh the Great?"

IV

DARKNESS had fallen by the time Curtis Temple finished packing his suitcase. He hoisted the heavy grip to a chair and stared out of the window, seeing Lee Mason's face against the curtain of the night.

At midnight he would take the plane to Wichita and change to a train for the remainder of the journey to Bomer and the site of the vanished encampment. But even the start of that journey was four hours into the future. Now there was nothing but the interminable agony of waiting, the bitter helplessness of his position in the face of the mystery.

He turned from the window and paced the floor, driving a clenched fist into his open palm, gritting his teeth against the onslaught of vague, formless terrors that chilled his blood. If only someone had seen the expedition breaking camp, had heard the thunder of the caravan's passage in the night! Or had even found evidence of violence at the camp site!

That would give the mystery a foundation of reality, give him something to get his teeth into. This horrible blankness dug into his nerves. He had the weird feeling of standing on the brink of some vast unknown, of being about to blunder awkwardly into con-

flict with some cosmic influence beyond human comprehension or resistance.

He swore at the thought and tried to reason his jangled nerves back to calmness. What had actually happened? A group of sane, intelligent people had seen fit to abandon a site and a project, perhaps for some greater research that had unexpectedly beckoned.

No one had happened to notice their departure and they, consumed with the wonder of some new discovery, had forgotten to communicate with their sponsors. There was nothing too unusual in that. Temple himself had, on occasion, become so engrossed in research that he had forgotten to eat or sleep or report for days on end.

His eyes lighted with the impact of a new thought. It was so beautifully simple and logical that only his disturbed mental state could have caused him to overlook it before. What had happened was obvious. Another meteorite had fallen. Perhaps one of the same swarm that had been detached from the group and hurled to Earth some distance away. The expedition, seeing or hearing of this new mass, had simply moved camp to the new site.

They had not as yet had time to reestablish communication with the university or even the nearby town. Of course that was what had happened. It *had* to be that way!

Curtis Temple laughed shakily and turned to the telephone beside his bed. He would phone McCabe, and set the prexie's mind at rest with that explanation.

He was bending over the instrument, smiling a little at his own earlier panic, when the window behind him was slammed to the top of its frame and a harsh voice cried,

"Stand right still there, young man! Put that there telephone down quiet and don't reach out for nothing."

Temple whirled around toward the

[Turn page]

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sound of the voice and his eyes snapped wide. He stood there for a moment, rigid with shocked incredulity.

THE intruder was a woman, but that fact Temple could have taken in his stride. It was her incredible appearance that made him reel, and doubt his own sanity.

She was a woman of perhaps fifty-five, tall and gaunt, with black hair stringy around her wrinkled face. Her skin was rough and reddened from wind and sun, and the old gingham dress she wore was faded from innumerable washings. As Temple stared dazedly, she climbed in through the open window and menaced him with the weapon clutched in her knobby, toil-worn hands —a pitchfork!

The woman held the sharp tines of the pitchfork colse to Curtis Temple's chest and stared at him for a long moment with faded eyes that were as blank and lifeless as the windows of an empty house. Finally she jerked her head.

"That your belongin's, all packed nice in that there grip?"

"Y-yes," Temple managed, swallowing hard. "Who are you? What on earth—"

"Don't matter," the woman snapped. "Get your grip and come along. Nice you had it ready. Saves waiting around for you to pack."

Temple took a deep, steadying breath and let his hands drop to his sides. The woman was obviously an escaped maniac, a dangerous one with that crude weapon, and the thing to do was humor her. He managed a sickly imitation of a placating smile.

"Why, I'll be glad to go with you," he murmured. "Just tell me where you intend taking me and—"

A spark glowed for a moment in the depths of the blank eyes. The pitchfork lifted, moved, and one of the sharp tines raked painfully across Curtis Temple's cheek, drawing blood.

"If you aim to get the best of me, don't try. Just get that grip and get going. You'll know where soon enough."

The stinging of the scratch on his cheek decided Temple against resistance. Still more than half convinced he was somehow dreaming all this, he hoisted his packed bag and slid obediently out onto the dark lawn.

The pitchfork shifted and prodded him urgently between the shoulder-blades. Under its compelling urge, he moved out across the lawn to the dark street in front. There, only the constant pricking of the sharp tines kept him from halting in fresh amazement.

A CAR waited at the curb—an ancient relic of a Ford touring car with cracked windshield and a tattered fabric top held down by straps and ropes. Behind the steering wheel sat a gaunt, weather-beaten man in faded overalls. Someone else in the back seat was concealed by the darkness. Temple stiffened as light from a distant street lamp showed a muddy Kansas license plate on the back of the Ford.

"I got him, Gus!" Temple's female captor cried as they neared the car. "He was all packed for traveling so we didn't need to wait around."

"That's good, Martha," the gaunt man approved. "Put him in here by me and you."

Temple was close enough now to see the figure in the back more clearly. He stopped short, ignoring the jabbing tines, and a low, harsh sound rose in his throat.

The man in the back seat was Mullane, the astronomer!

"Good evening, Curtis," Mullane said, in an odd voice that somehow held a quality of "unhumanness." "Step right in. I know you must wonder what all this is about, Curt, but I assure you it's all for a purpose—a great purpose—and presently you will understand."

"I hope so," Temple growled, relief bringing a surge of boiling anger. "Mully, if this is one of your gags—"

He stopped short, one foot on the running board, his hand in the act of swing-

ing open the car door. For just an instant he had felt a queer, dizzying sensation, like the touch of small cold fingers wriggling momentarily in his hair. The subtle impact made him gasp like a swimmer plunging suddenly into icy water.

Then Mullane and the gaunt man were both leaning forward, staring at him with a queer, feverish intensity. There was something about them, Temple could see then, that was not quite right. It seemed to be their eyes.

"Not this one," the gaunt man said suddenly, sharply. "Not this one at all."

Mullane said then, like a parent instructing a child, "Go back to your room, Curt. This was all a mistake. You go inside again and forget all about what you've seen."

"I'll be damned if I will!" Temple roared in a sudden burst of rage. "Something's wrong about all this—plenty wrong! I don't know what it is, but the answer's down in Kansas. These two came from Kansas and they're snatching you, Mully. I'll stop it! And I'll get to the bottom of what's going on!"

He surged forward, swung a fist at the gaunt man. His arm hit one of the straps holding the top down and the blow missed its target. Still roaring, Temple lunged over the side of the car, hands clutching at the man's gaunt throat.

He forgot the woman behind him until unbelievably powerful hands clawed into his shoulders and jerked him back from the car.

Curtis Temple spun helplessly, saw the pitchfork swing up, reversed, caught a glimpse of Mullane's wizened face watching him with detached, sad-eyed interest.

Then the handle of the pitchfork slammed along the side of his jaw with desperate fury. Curtis Temple had time for an instant of thankfulness that it had not struck the back of his head to undo all the doctors' fine work. Then the blackness of oblivion caught him up and swept his senses away.

V

OBLIVIOUS to both heat and dust, Curtis Temple rocked on his heels under the afternoon sun and stared with dull eyes at the nine dark chunks of stone, all that remained of the meteor camp. There was nothing else, save the nine raw scars from which the meteorites had been dug.

Fifty deputies were scouring the surrounding plains for signs of the missing expedition. Two FBI men systematically took the Solle farm apart in search of clues. Others were ranging the countryside, questioning fruitlessly.

In the eighteen hours that had passed since the abduction of Mullane, the astronomer, and the weird attack on Temple, nothing had happened to lighten the mystery. Rather, it had been deepened.

The blow to the jaw had stunned Curtis Temple for no more than a dozen minutes. As soon as he could reach the police, his breathless report had them combing the streets, throwing an airtight cordon around the city. But to no avail. The Kansas Ford with its kidnapers and Mullane, their victim, had vanished completely.

Before Temple boarded his plane at midnight, two more of the nation's leading scientists had disappeared, seized by weather-beaten men in overalls, armed with farm implements as weapons. It might have been a burlesque of crime, except for the steadily deepening undercurrent of nameless horror.

Stillwell, the FBI man in charge, met Temple when he arrived at the camp site the next afternoon. From fingerprints and the descriptions of eye-witnesses, the FBI had identified the kidnapers.

Martha and Gus Solle had abducted Mullane and attacked Curtis Temple. Young Gus Solle, Junior, had seized Dr. Rayfield, the authority on atomic power. Arnie Cole, the hired man, had abducted Lanelle, inventor of the new oxylium explosive.

Beyond that knowledge, the FBI was as stumped as everyone else. Four simple farmers, twelve of the best minds of science and some eighty-thousand-dollars' worth of instruments and equipment had apparently vanished from the face of the earth. There was no conceivable reason, though the newspapers screamed Communist spies, and crackpots besieged the Red investigators' headquarters in Washington.

Nor was there any apparent information to be gained from the meteorites themselves. Although to Temple's trained eye, they were obviously unlike the recorded types of stony aerolites.

But this was apparently no more than a matter of physical composition, and so little was yet known about meteorites that this meant nothing beyond the discovery of a new, rare type. Yet his mind persisted in linking them with the mystery.

Why, he could not tell. Perhaps it was because he could not forget the older mystery of why Kansas had been singled out for the grim bombardment from the skies. According to scientific calculation, taking all types of meteorites together, the rate of fall should average something like one to a square mile every million years.

Or maybe it was because the face of Lee Mason seemed to look out at him from every stone, a dark unfathomable pleading in her blue eyes.

He turned away from the nine grim secrets in stone and went back to the Solle farmhouse. Stillwell, the FBI man, met him on the porch.

"Any news?" Temple asked, for the tenth time. Stillwell mopped his streaming forehead and swore.

"Yes and no. Nothing about your girl, but the Solles turned up. Walked into the police station in Cincinnati an hour ago and asked for help to get back here."

"Then they can explain what's happened. They'll know where the others are."

STILLWELL shook his head. "But they don't. Our field man in Cincy is with them now and getting no place fast. They claim the last thing they remember is standing around camp that night, watching the meteors being cracked open. The next thing they knew, they were all waking up in their old Ford on this edge of the Pennsylvania hills. They can't remember a thing in between, and didn't know how they got there. They pooled what money they had and started home but their cash gave out, along with their gas, out on Reading Road in Cincinnati."

"They're lying!" Temple cried hoarsely. "They must be. People don't drive in their sleep halfway across the continent and start kidnaping for no reason!"

"People don't just vanish into thin air, either," Stillwell interposed drily, "but some did. I know how you feel, Temple, but it looks like we're facing the impossible on this case. Our men have given the Solles association tests and every known type of mental and physical exam—and we're not exactly amateurs, either. We've faced phony amnesia alibis before, but this time I'm afraid they're telling the truth."

The ringing of the old-fashioned telephone inside the house interrupted them. Stillwell went in and leaned against the wall beside the big boxlike instrument. Through the door, Temple could see the Federal man stiffen and bend down closer to the long arm of the mouthpiece. Temple started into the house, feeling the sudden urge and pound of blood in his eardrums.

Stillwell said something explosive into the phone and pronged the receiver with a violent crash. He whirled around and stared at Curtis Temple.

"A hell of a note!" he said flatly, angrily. "One hell of a fine note. Are all scientists nuts or do they just act that way to be different?"

"What do you mean?" Temple demanded, staring.

Stillwell's voice was bitter. "We were

looking for 'em. The cops and the county sheriffs and the state police and all their relatives and friends were looking for 'em, to say nothing of every half-witted amateur detective and newspaper reporter in the country. The whole damn nation was looking for 'em! And they were never lost."

"What? What do you mean?"

Stillwell kicked a chair in an excess of baffled rage.

"I wish I'd stuck to accounting. The whole meteor crowd just got in touch with Culwain, and Culwain notified Washington. They haven't been lost at all. They simply packed up, night before last, and moved to a new spot two miles east of Vingrove, Arizona. We couldn't trail them because they didn't follow the roads out of here. They cut across the prairie and the wind blew their tracks away. They're there, now, and your pal Mullane and the other missing scientists are with them.

"They've leased a camp site out in the desert, ordered a trainload of supplies and materials and have a hundred workmen hired from all over that end of the state putting up a regular tarpaper city. Don't ask me why, or anything about it. I wouldn't know. I'm just a poor, simple . . . Hey! If you're going to put in a long distance call to Arizona, you'd better let me place it for you. I know how to handle that kind of phone and the kind of small town operator they've got in Bomer."

Half an hour later Curtis Temple stood at the high well phone, with the old-fashioned tubular receiver trembling against his ear and heard the voice that had haunted his dreams. He had not fully realized how frightened he had been for her safety until now.

"Lee! Darling! Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right." It was her voice, yet not her voice, for it was lacking all the silvery overtones that gave it life and melody. "But I'm terribly busy, Curtis. You won't mind if I—"

Temple snapped, "I do mind! The whole country has been upset and I've been half out of my mind since you vanished. You can't just dismiss everything like that. Why did you leave the meteors and slip away like that? Why couldn't you have notified me? Lee, this isn't like you at all. What's going on that I can't know about? What is this important work that Mullane spoke about?"

"I'm sorry, Curtis," she cut in flatly, "but explanations will have to wait. In good time you will understand the project differently."

"Is it—has it something to do with the meteors?"

Temple heard the sharp hiss of a startled, indrawn breath. When she spoke again her voice was wary.

"No—well, yes, indirectly. It's something too vast and too vital to be delayed. I must go now. Good—"

"Wait!" he fairly shouted. "Lee, I've got to see you! I still think something's terribly wrong. I'm coming to Arizona. I'll be there tomorrow!"

"No!" She sounded suddenly panicky.

[*Turn page*]

AMAZING THING! By Cooper
SENSATIONAL NEW TING CREAM FOR FOOT ITCH (ATHLETE'S FOOT)
- REGULAR USE HELPS RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED PEELING TOES - AIDS HEALING AMAZINGLY!
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ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE.
Ting

"You must not come here. I *forbid* you to come here. I will not—"

He swung up, cutting off her protestations.

When he whirled from the phone, Stillwell was leaning against the wall close by, eying him queerly. An unlighted cigarette dangled from his lip. The FBI man had overheard part of the conversation and had sensed the trend of the remainder.

"So that's that," he said, shrugging. "There's a train out of Bomer in about twenty minutes that'll take you back home. Or I would drive you over to Rockton. The line to Phoenix runs through there. Which'll you take, Temple?"

"Don't be an idiot!" Temple roared. "Get me to Rockton as fast as you can. This isn't cleared up, by any means. Something's wrong with Lee Mason and I'm going to find out what."

"Good boy." Stillwell hurled away his unlighted cigarette and reached for his hat. "Something's wrong with the whole setup, but my hands are tied, now. If those men weren't kidnaped, the FBI's out of the case. From here on, it's your headache, boy, and I've got a feeling all hell is about due to break loose somewhere. If you need any personal help, call on me, Temple."

Neither of them could know how right Stillwell was, nor have any idea of who, within forty-eight hours, would be the first victim of the terrible inferno that he had predicted.

VI

THE spring blooming of cactuses made the desert a carpet of breath-taking beauty under the morning sun. But Temple, forcing his rented car at top speed over the rutty trail from Vingrove, had no eyes for the beauty around him.

His attention was focused on the huddle of dark buildings rising out of the desert floor ahead. Even at that distance, he recognized the familiar black shacks and the row of university trucks, and the sight brought a nostalgic lump into his throat.

But the swift stab of nostalgia was swept away in sheer wonderment at the changes wrought. The original six shacks were dwarfed by a vaster camp mushrooming above and around them. In the center of the area, a towering, windowless building, large enough to contain the original camp twice over, loomed skyward. Radiating from this central structure were wide streets lined with additional shacks in various stages of construction.

It was unbelievable, impossible—yet there it was! In town, Temple had been told that the camp had settled on a barren spot in the desert. Now, forty-eight hours later, a miniature city was racing skyward.

Some of the incredible speed of progress was accounted for by the flimsy frame and tar-paper construction of all the buildings. More was due to the vast hordes of workmen who swarmed like flies, raising an infernal din of sawing and hammering.

But manpower alone could not account for the miracle. Behind it must be that same mysterious, inhuman driving stimulus that had accomplished the impossible in moving the first camp over night.

Exactly what that relentless urge was, Temple was grimly determined to find out.

The speeding car topped a small rise and grounded to a sudden skidding halt. Ahead, the trail was barred by a massive steel gate, from either side of which a high, steel-mesh fence ran out to encircle the entire camp. Signs conspicuously posted on gate and fence read:

DANGER—CHARGED FENCE!
50,000 Volts!

Temple's eyes became glittering slits in the taut gray mask of his face. He got out of the car and strode purposefully toward the gate, fists swinging free.

BEYOND the barricade, a chunky man in shirt sleeves and stained straw hat burst out of a guardhouse, a heavy revolver bumping on one thigh. The chunky man waved his hands.

"Keep back, bud. This here's private property and there's enough hot juice in that gate to kill an elephant. Nobody gets in, so don't argue. Just beat it, fast!"

"Take it easy," Temple snapped coldly. "I want to talk to Miss Mason. Tell her it's Curtis Temple. She'll see me."

The chunky man gave the revolver a hitch and spat on the hot sand.

"I doubt it, bud. This crowd don't exactly go in for social contacts. But I'll try."

He vanished into the guardhouse and returned presently, shaking his head.

"Miss Mason says she ain't got time to chin. She says beat it home and she'll get in touch with you later."

"Then let me talk to Mullane or Rocossen or—"

The chunky guard tightened his lips and shook his head.

"Nope. She said for you not to pester nobody else, neither. Sorry, bud. You run along, now, like a good guy."

Temple controlled himself with an effort and swung on his heel. Force would gain him nothing against that deadly charged barrier. He paused suddenly.

"What's going on in there, anyhow? What are the buildings for?"

"I wouldn't know, bud. I just watch the gate." The guard shrugged and spat again. "For the dough they pay, I wouldn't even know if this was Arizona or Iceland."

Temple's jaw tightened. He whirled back to the car, threw it into low gear and stepped out on the running board as it lurched ahead.

"Hey!" He stopped the retreating guard with a shout. "You'd better step back a little. There may be some sparks flying when my car goes through your gate, fellow!"

The gateman stared, swore, and windmilled his arms.

"Don't! Hey, stop that crate! Wait'll I phone the office again. Judas Priest, I only work here, bud."

Waiting only long enough to see Temple slide in and stop the rolling car, he plunged back into his booth. A moment later he came back into sight, mopping his forehead.

"Sit tight, you crazy idjit," he panted. "She's coming out. Don't do nothing screwy till she comes, for God sake!"

Temple saw her then, hurrying across the hard-packed sand at the same accelerated tempo that seemed to mark everything about the camp. His breath caught in his throat. It was Lee Mason, with all the loveliness he knew so well.

Yet something was lacking, something that defied analysis. The perfection of line and color was there, but the innate personality was gone. She was like a beautiful wax doll, a perfect image in everything, but without the vital spark of animation.

SHE ignored the guard and came to the gate, staring through with no warmth in her flawless face to meet Temple's smile.

"Why are you making this disturbance, annoying me and interrupting my work? I told you not to come here, Curtis."

Her sharp rebuke was a knife stab in his heart.

"I had to come, Lee, to find out what happened to you, what has changed you from a human being into a—"

"Sentiment!" she spat out, and for an instant some faint spark flamed in her eyes. "I won't have it! My work here is too big and too vital to be disturbed by a silly emotional crisis. There is no room for personal feelings."

Temple's lips peeled back from his teeth.

"Why were Mullane and those others kidnaped?" he interrupted sharply, watching her face.

"Kidnaped?" she echoed coldly. "They came willingly in response to an appeal

the Solles carried for us."

"I don't believe you," Temple snapped. "Solle's old Ford could never have made that trip in so short a time. And you can't explain why Mullane and the others didn't leave word for their families if they came willingly, or why the Solles have lost their memories, or—"

"The mental condition of the Solles is of no interest to me," Lee cut in coldly. "The men came with them secretly to avoid delay. As for the trip, the Ford was carried East in the back of a fast truck. On the return trip, the Solles decided to stop over in the East so they and their car were dropped off in Pennsylvania."

Temple's jaw set grimly. That explained how the Ford and its passengers had eluded the police cordon. Their car had been hidden inside a closed truck. It was a clever dodge—too clever to have originated in the minds of simple farmers. The explanation only intensified Temple's nebulous suspicions.

"You don't expect me to swallow that, Lee," he said flatly. "You aren't talking or acting this way of your own free will. I'm convinced of that. I'll go now, but I'm coming back, and I'm going to get to the root of this mystery. If you've been hypnotized, Lee, or held by some threat—"

She whirled away and faced the waiting guard nearby.

"If you see this man sneaking around," she ordered coldly, pointing at Temple, "or trying to get through the fence, use your revolver. Those are orders. This is private property, and we have a legal right to defend our privacy with weapons. Is that understood, guard?"

"Lee!"

Her cold, inhuman words were hammer blows that smashed into Temple's reeling brain, exploded sharp agony in his heart and sent him reeling back on trembling limbs. He lifted a hand toward her, then dropped it to his side.

He turned away then, his eyes dull and his face rigid, inflexible.

This was not Lee Mason, not the laughing girl who had worked with him in the lab and walked hand in hand with him under the stars on the Culwain campus. This was an alien creature, a lovely shell from which all humanity had been drained.

Why or how he could not guess, but his fists suddenly ached with tension and his lips moved, silently. Somehow he would bring the vital spark back to her eyes, the warmth into her lovely face once more.

Meanwhile, he faced a superhuman task. He was a blind man groping in the darkness. He must steel himself against heartaches, put aside every emotion, become as ruthless and cold as she.

Without looking back, he got into his car and returned to his hotel in Vingrove to lay plans.

That afternoon the Crimson Plague made its horrible debut in Bomer, Kansas.

Stillwell of the FBI, was its first victim.

STILLWELL and his aides, their reports finished, had checked out of their hotel for the return to the Wichita field office. They were leaving the hotel, approaching their car at the curb when it happened. A dozen passers-by saw the tragedy.

Without warning Stillwell's voice broke in the midst of a remark. He stiffened, his lean body rocking up onto its toes with every joint locked in intolerable tension. An expression of terrible agony framed an unuttered cry.

To the onlookers, it seemed that some terrible internal pressure literally blasted every drop of blood in his body out to the surface, turning the puffed flesh a hideous crimson, dotting it with tiny droplets of exuded blood.

For an instant Stillwell poised on his toes, then plunged forward into the arms of a companion. When a doctor who had stopped in passing reached the victim's side, all signs of life had vanished.

No one thought of contagion. The doctor saw only a rare and exciting case of organic malfunction. The onlookers, pressing close, saw only a morbidly fascinating form of violent death. Willing hands carried the hideous travesty of a human form across the street to the funeral establishment.

"It beats me," the doctor told the gaping crowd when he had completed a sketchy examination. "I'm going to report this to the State Association right now."

He reached for the phone, stiffened, and collapsed with the same horrible suffusion of blood masking his flesh. The crowd fled in panic. One of the men who had borne Stillwell's body was struck down in the doorway to the funeral home, another in the street outside.

Queerly, neither of Stillwell's fellow FBI men were stricken. They risked death a hundred times through the night to cheat the Crimson Killer, whipping the crowds into a semblance of sanity, carrying the bodies of victims to an unused shed far out on the edge of town.

No more victims fell that night or the next morning. An army of medical warriors arrived in the night and went to work, analyzing and testing the bodies, the soil, water, air and food of the town. But results were negative. No unfamiliar germs were found, no organic reason for the seizures. Medical science stood baffled and helpless.

Doctors equipped with every modern defense against contagion buried the victims far from town. Two hours later three doctors, a nurse, the sexton who had volunteered to fill the graves, and an innocent farmer two miles from the scene of burial succumbed to a return of the Plague.

By nightfall, a circle of armed guardsmen surroumded Bomer to prevent the flight of refugees who might spread what the newspapers now called the "Crimson Plague."

That night a mob of grim-faced townsmen threw gasoline and flaming torches at the shed where Plague victims lay awaiting burial. A roaring flame sprang up to consume shed and bodies within a space of minutes, and the mob turned away, the macabre task completed.

A shift of wind suddenly whipped a shower of ashes from the ruins out into the crowd. Instantly, two men dropped with the terrible mask of the Plague on their faces. The survivors fled, half-insane with terror.

At midnight, the nation's leading medical authority faced a group of colleagues in secret meeting.

"I'll tell you," he said grimly, "though I won't tell the country at large until I have to. We're stumped. The Plague can't be anticipated, checked nor barred by anything we know. Neither burial nor cremation seem to effect its spread. We don't know what it is, where it came from or how to stop it.

"Gentlemen, unless some way is found to isolate utterly the body of every Crimson Plague victim beyond any possibility of contact with human beings, the Plague may sweep the world!"

VII

PACING the floor of his hotel room in Vingrove, Temple heard the radio reports of the Crimson Plague and groaned aloud.

The gods must hate Kansas!

The meteorites had fallen on Kansas, the weird change in the personalities of the scientists had occurred there, and now the Crimson Plague had burst from the same deadly focal point. It was too much to blame on coincidence. Behind the linking mysteries must lie a dark, sinister pattern of some kind, a pattern that maddened Temple because it eluded him.

Why hadn't he caught the Plague if it was a virulent contagious disease? He had been in close contact with Stillwell a few short hours before his attack and had moved through the same atmosphere.

Were the deadly, unseen organisms of

the disease lurking even now in his system, waiting their time to strike? Was the Crimson Plague somehow behind the unnatural actions of Lee Mason and her associates?

The endless chain of unanswered questions blurred inside his aching head. There was only one way to learn the answers and that was to penetrate the guarded camp and ferret out its hidden secrets. There must be some way into camp.

Temple paced the streets, asking endless questions of storekeepers and anyone else having contact with the camp, making and discarding a hundred wild schemes. He watched the familiar Culwain trucks disgorge loads of workmen from the day shift and pick up new workers for the night.

His hope of slipping into the group, disguised as a carpenter, were dashed when he saw that each man bore an identification disc riveted to his wrist, with numbers carefully checked against a register.

He got his car and drove out to camp, slipping off the road some distance from the gate to circle the fence on foot. Inside, workmen were tearing through their tasks under the beating glare of powerful floods, putting finishing touches on the last of the new structures. From the towering central building came the flame and sputter of electric arcs.

Temple circled warily, keeping outside the backwash of lights, without seeing a single guard patrolling the fence. Maybe he could insulate himself in some way and climb over the barricade while attention was centered on the work inside.

Fate interfered to keep him from making a fatal blunder. Her instrument was a stray steer from some nearby range that chose that moment to wander out of a dark arroyo. Temple saw the animal a moment before it poked an inquisitive nose against the wide mesh of the fence.

He saw the steer, and then he was half-blinded by the sudden blaze of greenish flame from shorted high tension current that blazed around the stiffening body. As the steer went down, bells jangled warningly from the heart of the camp. A knot of men raced into sight carrying rifles and shotguns, dashing toward the shorted section of fence.

TEMPLE faded back into the darkness, returned to his car and drove to town. His eyes were twin flames in the gray granite mask of his face and a white-knuckled fist pounded at the steering wheel in helpless agony.

Somehow the electrocution of the wandering steer filled him with a deeper horror than anything else that had occurred. It drove home, with terrible emphasis, the change that had taken place in Lee and his other scientist friends. The careless indifference to human lives evidenced by that crouching death-trap clawed at his raw nerves.

He spent the remainder of the night in his room, pacing the floor, driving his numbed brain to contrive new theories to explain the mystery and new plans for penetrating it.

And during the night the Crimson Plague circled out from Bomer, Kansas, striking in a score of towns within a radius of fifty miles of its starting point.

Next morning the streets of Vingrove were jammed with men. During the night construction work had been completed at the camp, the men paid off, and discharged.

Temple wasted most of the day hunting out these workmen and badgering them with fruitless questions. They knew nothing beyond the fact that they had built and wired frame shacks to a plain specification. What those shacks were to be used for, no one knew or cared. No, they had seen nothing suspicious unless driving and double wages could be called suspicious.

Only a few men, chiefly welders and riveters, seemed evasive and sullen. Temple learned nothing from them, but he gave up, convinced that these men

were simply bewildered because they could not remember exactly what their work had been. He was positive that, like the Solles, they had somehow lost all memories of their activities inside the camp.

"Get inside the camp! Get inside the camp!"

The words became a refrain that hammered Temple's frozen brain with the monotonous agony of an endless drumbeat. He paced the streets and the desert sands to their aching rhythm, timed his prayers and his curses to their endless repetition, ate little and slept less because the insistent clamor of their command would not give him any peace.

What was Lee doing in there? What were they doing to her? Was she sick or well? Was there any spark of feeling for him still hidden somewhere in her heart?

"Get into the camp!" the endless refrain cried. Get into the camp and find out!

DAYS of agony passed for Temple. He spent long hours on a nearby hilltop, watching the camp through strong glasses. He saw Lee and the others frequently, rushing on mysterious feverish errands that centered inside the big central building. A half-dozen sullen-faced guards had been hired and they spent much of their days hauling steel sheets and beams from dwindling piles outside into the main structure.

Nights, Temple battered his bloody head against the impregnable defenses of the camp. He was caught twice, when he had stowed away in the back of incoming trucks.

He hurled chains to short circuit the fence but was driven off when the alarm bells brought armed guards.

He tried ramming the fence with his car and was stopped by stakes set deep in the sand. A tunnel under the barricade met steel posts sunk deep in the ground. Twice he was shot at by guards, and narrowly escaped death. Still the unremitting refrain "get into the camp" drove him on.

Meanwhile, the Crimson Plague leaped out from Bomer, Kansas, in ever-widening circles. It broke all the known laws of contagion, skipping obvious victims and ignoring the feeble defenses raised against it. When the Plague chose to strike, it struck without regard for science's puny barriers. Doctors risked their lives to autopsy victims, and found nothing to indicate either a cause or a cure.

Only one thing was certain. Unless mankind found some remote corner of the Universe in which to entomb the bodies of Plague victims, the spread could never be checked. Most of the cases apparently rose from contact with Plague bodies, no matter what efforts were made at disinfection, nor how remote that contact might be.

The thirteenth day after his last talk with Lee, Temple saw a fresh burst of activity seize the camp. All day the group hauled bundles into the main building with frantic haste. When nightfall brought no cessation of the mysterious activity, Temple stayed at his hilltop post, watching through his night-glasses.

He saw figures moving on the roof of the big structure and presently the roof itself seemed to split apart and open a gaping chasm through its center. In that chasm, Temple could faintly see a round, blunt-nosed cylinder poked upward but the resolving power of his glasses was too weak to make out details.

Whatever was happening, he felt, marked the culmination of the mysterious project. The thought doubled his determination to penetrate the camp that night, regardless of cost! He left his post then, and drove down the winding trail toward the darkened camp.

He was half a mile from his goal, in the lee of a high hill, when he first became aware of a distant muttering rumble, more vibration than sound. The ground shook to its thunder, sand billowed from the shifting dunes, and the steering wheel wobbled in his grasp.

With the thought of an earthquake uppermost in his mind, Temple braked the car and kicked open the door.

At that instant, the thunder suddenly swelled, rising to an unbearable pressure against his eardrums. A weird, bluish light sprang up from some hidden point beyond the hills, illuminating the desert landscape with unbearable brilliance.

Then light and thunder whipped away, dwindling to a whisper that lingered an instant after the darkness had once more closed in. By the time Temple got out of the car and looked upward, there was nothing.

Nothing but a tiny speck of flame that burst up through the vast panorama of the constellations and was gone.

VIII

CURTIS TEMPLE was an experienced meteor-hunter. His eyes and muscles had been trained to that superb coordination that is essential in capturing the secrets of elusive, fleeting meteor trails.

It was second nature for his eyes to chart the fragmentary course of that vanishing spark through the fixed stars, and reflex action for his fingers to clock its speed across a familiar asterism on the specially built timer in his wristwatch. When the spark finally disappeared, he glanced down at the dial.

He sprang into the car and snapped on the dome light. For half an hour he sat tensely, a pad of paper propped against the steering wheel, his pencil racing furiously, recording endless calculations and computations.

When at last he had finished, Curtis Temple sat back and drew a deep, incredulous breath. He had spent two feverish weeks attempting to fathom the activity within the camp, and here lay the answer on his pad—supplied by a dying spark, a stop-watch and mathematics.

By the motion of the spark across a constellation whose *apparent* diameter he knew, he had obtained rough estimates of its speed away from Earth. By his knowledge of the position of stars it occulted in its flight, he had arrived at a close approximation of its angle of departure. By projecting these figures, he had reached both a beginning and an end to the phenomena.

It was incredible, impossible. Yet the object could have been nothing but a rocket-propelled space ship, leaping up from the heart of the meteor camp at a speed that approached fifty miles a second. Workable rocket ships were still a dream of the future, so far as science knew, yet nothing but a man-made and man-propelled object could shatter the shackles of gravity at such a speed.

And unless his hasty projection of its tangent was far in error, it could have hurtled up into space toward only one possible objective—to intersect the orbit of the Moon!

The nine black meteorites on the Kansas prairie had apparently come from the Moon, and a rocket ship was apparently flying to the moon!

So many things became clear to him as he reluctantly accepted the evidence of his figures. The huge central building had housed the ship and its roof had opened to permit its departure. The tons of metal must have gone into construction of the craft.

Rayfield and Lanelle, authorities on atomic and explosive power, had obviously solved the problem of propulsion, while Mullane had supplied a keen knowledge of Lunar topography.

But why? The solution of one mystery only intensified the greater one. Why keep such an accomplishment secret? Had the meteorites revealed the presence on the moon of some treasure hoard so vast that lust for it turned human beings into mad machines?

A NEW thought struck Temple and whitened his cheeks. Had they all boarded that ship and left Earth forever, perhaps deserting a world they foresaw doomed by the spreading

Plague? In the same breath he discarded the idea.

He had glimpsed enough of the ship to estimate its size. It could never transport twelve persons, even if they had accomplished miracles in solving the problem of air supply and fuel storage. Temple knew enough of the theoretical problems of astrogation to estimate a maximum carrying capacity of not over three or four persons.

Then the others were still in camp, and with them lay the solution to the deepening mystery. Temple kicked the motor to life, and sent the car rocketing along the rutty trail without lights, steering by the faint radiance of the stars. As he drove, a desperate plan was forming in his mind.

He left the road and circled around behind the camp. It lay in darkness tonight, except for a scattering of lighted windows, but the full radiance of the floods was essential to his desperate plan. Parking, he got an iron jack-handle and a .30-30 rifle from the car. The rifle he had bought a week before on the off chance that it might serve a future purpose. Tonight it was vital to his scheme.

Moving swiftly, he ran through the darkness and hurled the jack-handle against the fence. Crackling flame leaped up at the impact and the shrill clangor of alarm bells burst from camp. Instantly the floods came on, turning the night to day, revealing the knot of armed guards racing his way.

Temple stood for a moment, fixing the location of his target in his mind, then ran back to the car. Hunching up on the fender, he rested the rifle across the hood and centered its sights above the running men on the tiny black bulk of the transformer over the generator truck, nerve center of the deadly charged fence.

It was a desperate gamble, for the guards, hearing the whistle of slugs over

[*Turn page*]

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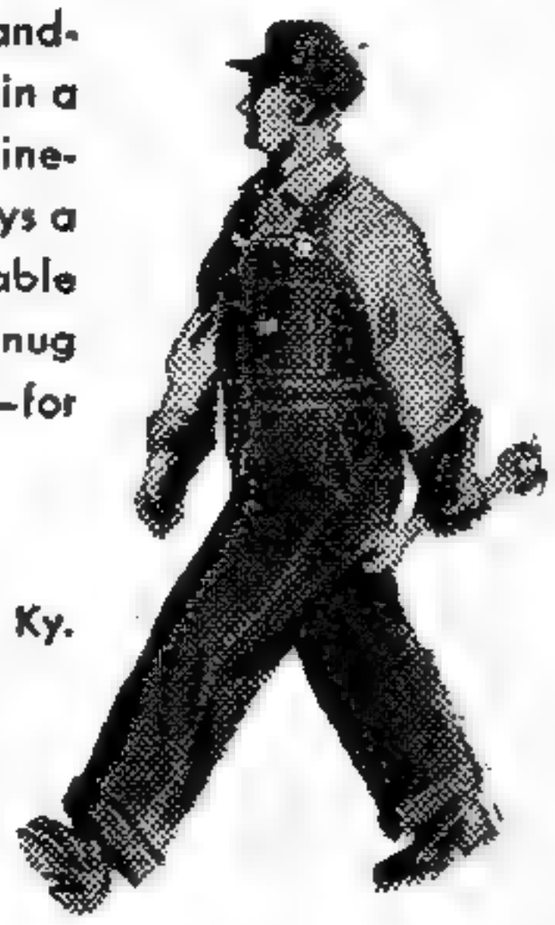

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their heads, would think themselves attacked and direct a withering return fire. Temple's eyes were narrow and cold with grim purpose as he squeezed the trigger.

The rifle *spanged* and bucked against his shoulder. From camp came the shrill scream of a ricochet as the slug glanced from the rounded transformer shell. The guards halted for a startled moment, and then began firing. Lead whistled around Temple's head and clanged into the body of the car.

He ignored the hail of death, concentrating on bettering his aim. The guards were only a hundred yards away, yelling and shooting, when he fired again.

This time a burst of purple flame rippled up from his target and every light in camp whipped out. The sudden darkness was blinding and the guards halted with yells of alarm.

Instantly Temple slipped from the car and raced down the fence, away from the milling guards who scattered to find flashlights. More startled cries came from the camp.

Temple ignored the sounds until they faded behind him. Then he stopped and threw the rifle against the fence. There was no answering crackle of shorted current. The barrier was at least momentarily robbed of its deadliness. At any moment some emergency circuit might be cut in, though, restoring its murderous potentialities, but he brushed that thought aside.

Toes and fingers dug into the wide mesh, he fairly hurled his lean bulk up to the top of the barricade. He poised there for a moment, then leaped out into the darkness.

HE LANDED on all fours, ignored the vicious stab of cactus needles against his palms, and plunged forward toward the dark camp. He had to get in and find concealment before the lights came back on or the demoralized group organized their defenses.

Flashlights weaved in and out among the shacks ahead and centered on the generator truck. Temple pounded on and burst into the darker canyon of the camp street at a dead run. Ahead loomed the vast bulk of the rocket hangar, and he headed toward it as the heart of the mystery he hoped to penetrate.

Suddenly a dark bulk sprang at him out of the shadows of parked trucks, and starlight glittered on the metal tube of a flashlight or a gun. Temple's ears caught the sharp inhalation of breath that preceded a bellow of alarm. There was no time to identify the instrument or discover whether the figure was that of a guard, or one of his former friends.

Temple hurled himself at the dark figure and his fists lashed out. The impact of his knuckles against jawbone sent a sharp tingle of pain up his arm. Then the figure was crumpling soundlessly. Temple's exploring fingers felt the cool bulk of a flashlight and he snatched it before racing on.

He had almost reached the hangar when a puddle of yellow light from a flash swept out from between two shacks. Temple darted into the shadows and froze a moment before the light and its bearer came into the street. He held his breath and saw the thin, ascetic face of Spirovic, professor of wave mechanics, behind the flashlight's glow.

Spirovic halted while his light probed under the nearer parked trucks, miraculously missing the figure Temple had downed a moment before. Then the light swung away, and Temple drew a breath of relief. He was starting to creep on when the physicist suddenly halted and whirled back.

The flashlight's beam swept out unerringly and pinned Temple's crouching figure in its glare. Behind it the physicist's thin face was wolfish, predatory, and he snatched at a small black case that looked like a candid camera hung at his side.

Temple did not wait to learn how Spirovic could have sensed his presence or what the case contained. He exploded into action, leaping straight at the glaring light.

His shoulder knocked the case from Spirovic's hands and sent the professor's slight figure reeling. Temple kneed him down and burst down the street at a furious sprint. Behind him, the physicist's shrill voice rose in a shout of alarm that was echoed by other throats from all sides.

TEMPLE glanced back and saw Spirovic on his feet, leveling the black case. Suddenly a ghostly bluish beam shot from the case. Before Temple could dodge, it caressed one of his pistoning legs.

The contact was a searing flame of agony. His leg went numb and crumpled, throwing him forward onto hands and knees. The beam winked out and Spirovic raced forward, bawling in a triumphant voice, tugging another flashlight out of his pocket.

For a moment Temple lay in darkness. His right leg was a dead, useless thing without life or feeling. He dug elbows and clawed hands into the hard-packed sand and dragged himself away from the street, toward the dark space between two shacks. Flashlights sprang up around him, reaching out with hungry fingers. Temple blinked cold perspiration from his eyes and crawled on, his breath a wheezing anguish in his throat.

The touch of the blue ray, whatever it was, had been no more than a light caress, and life began to tingle back into Temple's leg. He lurched to his feet and plunged into a grim travesty of a run, lurching and stumbling. For a moment the flashlights lost him. Then they picked up his trail in the sand.

Temple pounded on with blind, dogged determination until the towering walls of the central structure loomed up overhead. He stumbled against a small lean-to structure against the bigger building and his fumbling hands touched a heavy door handle.

The door fell away with weighty ponderousness, throwing him forward, off-balance, into the inky interior. A blast of chill air struck his face. This must be a refrigerated storehouse for perishable supplies.

It was at least a temporary hiding place, regardless of its purpose. He eased the door shut and stumbled forward into the enveloping blackness.

His unsteady feet tangled with some yielding object. He teetered, clawed at the empty darkness and went down with a clatter across the thing that had tripped him. For a moment he lay still, fighting down the furious panting of his lungs, listening to the faint sounds of the search outside.

After a time he sat up, got out the captured flashlight and snapped it on under his coat. The circle of filtered radiance seeped through the cloth and spread out over the thing beneath him.

It was the fully clothed body of a man.

Temple's breath made a sharp wheezing sound in his nostrils. He scrambled to his knees and a human face showed in the glow of the light. Then the sound of Temple's breathing stopped, and the body slipped back into the concealing shadows.

He had seen the face of the chunky gateman, suffused with the unmistakable spotted crimson of the Plague!

The outer door crashed open and a lance of the bluish light, sharper and stronger now, swept in to engulf him.

He knew a single stab of utter agony, then darkness.

IX

EYES opening in shadowy gloom, Curtis Temple stared dully at his surroundings. He was lying on an iron cot in a small, windowless room of unpainted planking, with only a solid door of heavy timbers to relieve the blankness of the walls.

Overhead, through a low ceiling of heavy steel mesh, he saw a high-vaulted roof with daylight filtering through cracks and chinks. One crack, wider than the others, seemed to split the entire sweep of the roof into two massive sections.

That did it! Sight of the oddly-split roof broke the numbness in his brain. He sprang to his feet as the memories flooded back.

He had penetrated the camp, fallen on a Plague victim, and been struck down by the mysterious paralyzing force of a blue beam. Now he was prisoner in a cell inside the towering rocket hangar. The split roof was evidence of that.

Memory of the Plague victim brought a stab of terror to his heart. The Crimson Plague had struck the camp. Were there any other victims of its inexorable fury? Was Lee doomed to fall before it? Why had they left the body of that guard so open and unguarded? Why didn't they flee?

In a fury of desperation he lunged at the door and the walls of his prison. He had to get out! He had to get Lee away from the Plague area at once! The danger of his own exposure to the dread epidemic was swept away in his fears for her safety.

Small as his cell was, it was rock-solid. At last Temple gave up his efforts to batter down the door, and a measure of sanity came back to his brain. He looked around, and the low-meshed ceiling caught his eye. He sprang up, hooked his fingers into the screen and pulled himself up against it.

His eyes snapped wide as this new position widened his angle of vision.

The rocket ship was back! It lay in its massive cradle, pointing almost vertically upward, so close to his prison that it was barely beyond his angle of vision from the floor. His eyes sifted the gloom and made out a labyrinth of gears and pulleys that opened the split roof and tilted the cradle.

The ship was larger than he had at first thought—a good fifty feet in length, of tear-drop shape, with a maximum diameter of perhaps twenty feet. The nose rounded sharply to a tubular point, and a few feet behind it the hull was encircled by what appeared to be a fluted metal collar.

Then he saw that the collar was actually a cowling that streamlined a ring of backward-pointing tubes projecting from the hull. He guessed these to be some sort of steering jets. Further back, the smooth metal was broken by stubby, retractable wings.

The entire hull was of dull, seamless metal, unbroken by any ports or doors. The entrance, he guessed, must be down close to the tail, which was below his line of vision.

Temple's muscles weakened then, and he dropped to the floor, his mind seething with new questions and problems. To all of them, there seemed but one source from which to get answers—the group themselves.

He threw back his head, filled his lungs and shouted.

"Hey!" he roared. "What's the idea of locking me in here? Let me out!"

The shout boomed up to the vaulted roof and whispered away into silence. Temple waited, then shouted again.

THIS time he got results. A door creaked somewhere outside and footsteps clattered briskly. A lock clicked outside his door, and a small peep-panel swung outward to frame the cold, expressionless face of Mullane.

"Stop creating a disturbance, Curtis," Mullane snapped sharply. "You were confined here to prevent further interruptions to our work. Please be sensible about it and remain quiet. You will be fed at regular intervals."

"Go to hell!" Temple shouted furiously. "If I'm such a pest, why keep me around? Why don't you knock me in the head and shove me into cold storage with that other poor devil?"

"We considered that," Mullane said coldly, "and decided this way was better and less annoying. Please don't make us change our minds, Curtis."

"Why, you—" Concern for Lee's safety suddenly dissolved his anger. "Mully, for God's sake, why did you leave that body lying out there? Has anyone else been stricken with the Plague? How is Lee? She can't stay here and risk that!"

"Calm yourself," Mullane said curtly. "Miss Mason is in no danger. Her knowledge is too valuable to be risked."

He started to close the small panel.

"Wait!" Temple cried. "When did the rocket ship come back? Or is this a different one? I saw one take off."

"The same one," Mullane answered coldly. "It returned the night after its departure, promptly on schedule."

"Hey! How long have I been out?"

Mullane's voice was patient.

"Two days, Temple. Now, please don't make it necessary for us to apply the beam again in order to avoid a disturbance."

"Cut it!" Temple shouted furiously. "What's this all about? What are you using that ship for? Where did it go?"

"The rocket was flown to the Moon by Dr. Rocossen," Mullane answered, after a momentary hesitation. "It carried a prefabricated launching cradle for the return journey and an air-tight landing depot shack. Beginning tomorrow, the ship will operate on a regular schedule, leaving here every fifth day."

Temple gaped in sheer amazement.

"Why? What is there on the Moon? You certainly aren't doing all this just to start sight-seeing tours?"

"To transport the bodies of Crimson Plague victims to the moon for disposal."

"Plague victims?"

"Exactly. There is apparently no place on Earth or in Earth where the bodies may be placed beyond danger of the infection's spreading. And as long as the Plague spreads, medical science can't stop to dig into history for the Plague's origin or take the time to develop suitable combative measures. But if the spread could be at least checked, science feels that it could develop an antidote. We have found a way to check it by transporting the bodies of Plague victims to Moon immediately, before they contaminate others. There, insulated from Earth by the airless miles of space, they are no longer a menace and the panic already growing in areas yet unattacked will abate.

"Two days ago, we communicated our offer to the Government. Yesterday it was accepted. We have present facilities for transporting twenty-five bodies at a time and construction has already been begun on a larger rocket with a capacity of two hundred. Within two months, the Plague should be halted."

TEMPLE'S head was swimming. He caught his breath with an effort.

"You mean you discovered the Plague before it started and moved here to work out this cemetery on Moon idea? Who's going to handle the victims? How do you keep from catching the Crimson Plague yourselves? If you've worked out a safeguard against it, why haven't you given that to the country?"

"We are all immune. Naturally immune. We are, therefore, taking turns collecting the bodies in our own trucks. That was a part of our generous offer."

"Where did the Crimson Plague come from, Mully? There is no previous record of it in medical history."

"It is a new and alien menace to Earth, Curtis, from somewhere in outer space, brought by those meteors."

Curtis Temple's eyes flamed dangerously in the drawn grayness of his face.

"So that's it," he said softly. "The Culwain Expedition cracked open a meteor and saw the Plague inside. They realized instantly what it would do to the world and that they themselves, out of a few billion people, were selected by Fate to be naturally immune. So they rushed here, called in other scientists to join their unselfish sacrifice, and built a rocket ship—a flying hearse to their cemetery in the sky. Is that correct?"

Mullane's answer sounded like a metallic purr.

"Exactly, Curtis. That is exactly the way it occurred."

Temple's lips curled away from his teeth. He leaned forward and barked one word.

"Nuts!"

Mullane's face was a blaze of cold

fury. He started to wheel away.

"What do you take me for?" Temple roared. "A dope? How could you see micro-organisms the best medical equipment in the world can't isolate? How could you know what they'd be or that you would be immune? And why treat me like a poor relation? So I'll run away and escape the Plague? That's what I'm supposed to believe, isn't it? Well, I've been exposed twice and I'm still here. Either I'm immune, too, or your Crimson Plague is as phony as your alibi!

"Maybe that's it. Maybe the Crimson Plague isn't bacterial at all! Are the bodies of earlier victims waiting around for weeks to be buried? Is there some secret action of the Plague that inhibits decay? Go ahead, Mully. Let's hear you explain that in your inimitable manner."

Mullane started to swing the peephole shut. When no more than a slit remained open, he said coldly,

"Our first decision regarding your disposal was a mistake. I realize that clearly now. However, a prolonged application of the blue beam will rectify that error perfectly."

THE panel slammed shut, Mullane's angry footsteps drummed away and out of the building. There was no doubt that he would be coming back with one of those paralyzing beam projectors almost immediately.

Temple must have hit too close to the truth, so close that his continued existence was a menace to the group. Nor did Temple have any illusions of again being permitted to recover from the ray.

Its touch meant his finish now, and the end of resistance to the group's mysterious purpose.

He had to escape—but how? The iron cot, the only movable object in the room, offered a crude weapon. Temple demolished it with a kick and wrenched off an iron leg.

Not that he actually expected a chance to use a club. Mullane needed only to open the panel and send the beam in through it. For that matter, it might penetrate the walls themselves. Clothing had offered no bar to its paralyzing touch.

The heap of blankets from the cot met Temple's eye, and a vague hope stirred. With desperate haste he ripped them into strips and knotted together a crude rope with a slip-noose held open by a piece of spring wire from the cot. Then, using the cot frame for a ladder, he climbed up and poked the noose through the wire mesh ceiling above the door.

It was such a slender gamble. So many things could go wrong, and failure would sign his death warrant.

Mullane's footsteps hammered back and halted outside. There was no sound of the panel being unlocked this time, and Temple's heart sank. He had to make Mullane open that.

"Mully!" he called. "Hold on a minute. Maybe you're right and I'm wrong. Maybe I have been interfering with the one thing that can save civilization."

Temple's breath hissed out as the panel was opened.

"Don't be childish," Mullane snapped, bending close to lift the black projector case. "You are only trying to stall me to save your own valueless life. It will not work."

Sweat came out on Temple's forehead. His right hand, beyond Mullane's line of vision, was desperately working the free end of his makeshift rope. In the opening, above the astronomer's unsuspecting head, the crude noose dangled too far forward to center above its objective. He had to make Mullane bend forward.

Temple deliberately stepped back out of sight.

"You can't escape, Curtis," Mullane cried and bent forward, shoving the projector into the opening.

"The hell I can't!" Temple barked and snapped his hand up. "Watch me!"

X

A QUICK twist of Temple's wrist, and the noose dropped over Mullane's head, the dislodged strip of spring

dropped free and a jerk pulled the loop tight. At the same instant, Mullane's hand pressed the projector knob.

The blue beam missed Temple's head by inches and winked out as Mullane dropped the projector to claw at the strangling line. Praying that the flimsy fabric would stand the strain, Temple wrapped the line around his fists and tugged.

He did not relinquish his hold until Mullane's struggles ceased and his hands fell away from his purpling throat. Then holding his victim erect by the taut rope, Temple reached out through the narrow panel, located the keys and let himself out.

Lowering Mullane's body, he tore away the strangling noose and felt for a heartbeat. It was there, faint but steady.

"You'll be okay," he grunted, "and some day you'll thank me for this, Mully."

He locked the limp figure in his own former prison and retrieved the fallen projector. If he survived to escape the camp, science would want to know the secret of that strange, paralyzing blue beam.

Right now, escape was farthest from his thoughts. He had penetrated the camp, but not the mysteries. Until Lee Mason was freed of the mysterious influence that had so changed her nature, he would not leave. But he had to find a hiding place until nightfall if he was to move about with any degree of freedom. He looked around the great hangar.

The rocket loomed above him, its cluster of giant stern jets deep in a metal-lined pit in the floor to confine the fierce heat of take-off blasts. Stubby elevator fins at each side rested on banks of rollers, and a gangplank led up to a round closed port in the ship's belly.

Temple reluctantly tore his interest away from the big ship and sought a haven. His eyes fell on the closed outer door of the hangar, and he crossed to it. Holding his breath, he eased it open and peered out. For an instant, the sight that met his gaze froze him to immobility..

Night was falling and the street outside was heavy with shadows. Through those shadows came the whole expedition group, running in a grim bunch, clutching a variety of weapons. They were heading with ominous purposefulness straight at the hangar door.

Lee Mason led them, one of the deadly projectors in her slender hands. There was no question but that by some mysterious means they knew of Temple's escape and were rushing to block his purpose!

He whirled and raced around the looming rocket toward another door that showed faintly in the far wall. He went through it as his pursuers burst into the hangar behind him. He found himself in a narrow corridor lined with small laboratory cubicles and leading to an outside door at the end. Apparently each scientist had his own research room close to the rocket.

[*Turn page*]

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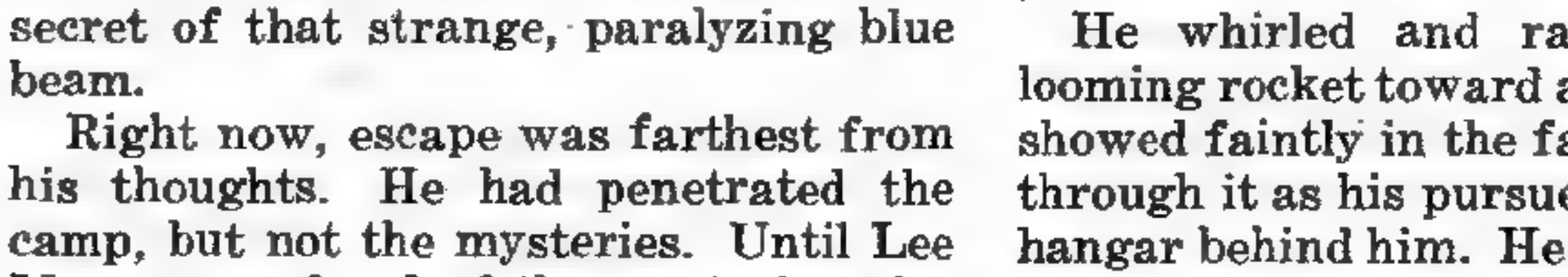

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Head down, Temple raced for the distant exit. He had almost reached his goal when feet scraped outside and the knob turned. Someone was coming in, blocking his escape that way! He turned and darted into the nearest laboratory.

From the maze of optical equipment, this room must belong to Lansdon, the chubby physicist. Temple's eye was caught by an odd instrument, like a grotesque stereopticon, on the desk.

It bore the familiar double-viewing apparatus, except that one lens was clear glass and the other completely opaque. The converging screen at the back was a film of some richly violet metal that Temple guessed might be caesium.

But there was no time to indulge scientific curiosity by probing further. The footsteps were approaching the door and in the laboratory room were no windows or other means of exit.

Temple took the only possible hiding place, the space below the laboratory room bench. A moment later the steps entered the room.

HE HEARD them advance a few paces, then stop. The sound of tense breathing reached his ears, and the muted rustle of clothing. Nerves crawled along his spine. There was something ominous in the deadly quiet. Then Lansdon's voice spoke.

"Come out, Temple. Come out from behind my bench. I know you're there and I have a gun trained on your heart."

Temple's breath hissed out. He touched the projector under his coat, then his hand dropped. He could not turn it on men who had been his friends and associates. For all he knew, this one he held might be set to kill at a touch of the blue beam. He sighed and climbed out.

The movement brought his eyes in line with the screen of the odd apparatus on the desk and for an instant he saw Lansdon's head and shoulders through that instrument. The sight froze him in gaping amazement.

The screen showed something alien and incredible—a ball of glowing violet luminescence clinging to the base of the physicist's brain, tight against the nape of his neck. It was like nothing Temple had ever seen before, simply a globule of pure radiance without form, shell or nucleus.

He looked around the screen, and the thing was invisible. He looked back *through* the screen, and it was still there, pulsing quietly in hideous simulacrum of life, invisible and unsuspected without the detector. Temple straightened and met Lansdon's furious eyes.

"You have seen too much," the chubby scientist whispered. "Now you must be destroyed at once."

The revolver in his hand lifted and flamed, a blasting thunder in the little room.

But Temple, forewarned by Lansdon's whitening trigger finger, was already plunging aside and away. The slug touched liquid fire to his ribs below his left arm. For an instant he stumbled, gasping.

Then he had his breath again, and the terrible urgency of his purpose poured fire into veins and muscles. There was only the single door, and Lansdon with his deadly pistol blocked that. Temple whirled and came up off his knees with his sound right shoulder up, and his head down.

He struck the wall behind the desk with the force of a battering-ram. Thin plywood and tarpaper gave way before his smashing impact. He plunged out into cool darkness, rolled over, felt the lash of sand particles in his face, driven by a pistol slug that missed him by inches.

Then he was up, running desperately, feeling the sting of fire in his shallow wound. Behind him, Lansdon shouted wildly, directing the others to race out and cut off the fugitive's flight. Ahead lay the road to the outer gate and freedom.

Temple ran a dozen steps down this road, then swerved back toward the hangar. It was a crazy, suicidal move,

but now that he knew so much of the terrible truth, his mind was fixed on one grim, desperate purpose. Near the hangar door, he froze into deep shadows and watched pursuit stream out to cut off his path to the outer fence.

His eyes grew colder as Lee Mason raced out, clutching the projector and a flashlight. Like a grim ghost, Temple drifted through the shadows in pursuit as she marched down one of the streets, whipping the light from side to side.

Gradually, as they drew near the edge of the camp, some of the tension went out of his nerves. Apparently whatever weird power had revealed his presence before was now inactive for she gave no sign of sensing pursuit.

At the end of the street she stopped and flashed the light out toward the fence. When she turned back at last, Temple was waiting with arms outspread. He pounced like grim lightning.

One hand muffled her cry of warning while the other batted down the flashlight and projector. For a few moments she fought with the lithe strength of a panther, almost breaking the clutch of his weakened left arm a dozen times. He knew that he was doomed if she succeeded in raising one shout of alarm. There was only one alternative.

TEMPLE'S right fist came up and exploded against the slender jaw. Lee gasped and went limp in his arms. His face cold and emotionless, Temple scooped up the projector, slung her slender figure onto his shoulder and looked around. He was by no means free as long as that circle of deadly fence hemmed him in.

His eyes fell on the dark bulk of the parked university trucks. He ran to the first one and saw that the key was in the ignition lock. A moment later he was in the truck, with Lee's limp form beside him, rocketing toward the gate.

The roar of truck motor warned the rest of his intention. They must have telephoned ahead, for the gateman opened fire with a pistol when the truck was still some distance away. Lead spanged on the body and blasted glittering diamonds from a corner of the windshield, whipping dangerously close to Lee Mason's silent form.

Temple, his eyes cold, held the throttle down and drew out the captured projector. He leaned out the open window and thumbed the knob. Blue light beamed out, shifted, and engulfed the guard. He crumpled to the ground.

The next moment Temple was out, throwing the master switch that opened the big gate. A touch told him the gateman was only paralyzed. Then the big truck was roaring out through the gate into the night, away from the yells and the shots and licking tongues of blue flame that receded in hopeless pursuit.

At the edge of Vingrove, Temple stopped long enough to find strong cord and tie Lee's ankles and wrists securely. Then he swung away from the town onto the highway that led northward, and pushed the throttle to the floor.

Letting the endless desert miles slip past, his mind probed at the new problems arising from his desperate gamble. He had Lee Mason, and he knew vaguely what was responsible for the change of personality, but he had no idea how to bring her back to normal. Yet unless he could accomplish that restoration, she would be his bitter enemy.

Worse, he had no place to go. In the eyes of the law he was now a kidnaper and a car thief, and Lee would be the first to condemn him if he were captured. If he tried to face the law with the incredible truth as he now knew it, he would be rushed to the nearest insane asylum.

Beside him, Lee stirred and moaned faintly. Temple instantly drew off the highway, cut the motor and bent over her. His fingers, probing the soft cloud of her hair, experienced the faintest of tingling sensations and he knew then that the thing he suspected was there.

Presently her eyes opened dazedly. She tugged at her bonds, then spat at him with an animal snarl of rage.

"Take it easy," Temple advised quietly. "I know what I'm up against now, and I tied those ropes to stay. They'll stay until I've learned exactly what you are and how you can be destroyed. I'm not speaking to Lee Mason. I'm talking to you—the thing that has burrowed into her brain and enslaved her body to use as its active vehicle. I know you're there. I saw one of you or a piece of you on Lansdon's skull, through his sub-visible detector. I know the glowing thing I saw changed him from a human being to a flesh and blood robot, and the same happened to Lee and the other scientists."

"You're insane!" Lee flung at him furiously, writhing and fighting the confining ropes. "I don't know what you're talking about! In case you've forgotten, Curtis Temple, the penalty for kidnaping is the electric chair."

Temple's eyes were terrible in their coldness.

"In case you've forgotten, he retorted through set teeth, "the penalty is the same for murder. Lee Mason means more than life to me, and always will. But if I see that I'm going to be captured and my purpose blocked, I'll destroy this lovely shell of her before I'll see it go on to a lifetime of horrible slavery. Think *that* over before you try calling for help when we pass through some of these towns!"

XI

IT WAS four o'clock in the morning when Temple parked on a dark residential street in Phoenix, opposite an imposing house. He knew that house well. Its owner was an old friend and former classmate, Allen Farge, now Professor of Physics at Mountain Tech.

Temple hated to draw anyone else in on his problem, but he had to have refuge and a modern laboratory in which to work out the solution.

He shut off the motor and turned to Lee Mason.

"I'm leaving you alone for ten minutes," he said. "You're plotting ways to defeat me, of course, and you may succeed. Apparently you're possessed of Satan's own science. But remember this before you try anything. You tried to get into my brain the night Mullane was kidnapped and you failed. You can't control me! You know I'm a deadly menace to you but you can't read my mind to tell what I'm going to do or just how dangerous I really am. Your only chance to smash me is to stay close and try to catch me napping. That means controlling someone close to me, and no one will ever be closer than Lee Mason. Remember that when you think of harming her or moving your control to someone else."

He swung out of the cab, steeling his heart against the thought of leaving her there, bound and uncomfortable. His only solace was the realization that Lee Mason's own life and happiness hung in the balance.

Farge's house was dark and silent, but persistent ringing of the bell brought a blaze of lights. An ornamental lantern above Temple's head flashed on, and the square, homely face of Allen Farge squinted out through the door pane in sleepy irritation.

The irritation vanished at sight of Temple, and the door whipped open.

"Holy boiled mackerel! *Curt!* What are you doing out in this country? Out here for your health?" He squinted and made a face. "You look like a first class wreck going some place to happen. What you need is a drink."

Temple grinned wearily. "Yes, what I need, Al, is a stiff drink about so-o-o high. And fix yourself one, too. You'll need it when you hear my story, fellow."

Farge grabbed his arm and pushed.

"Straight ahead to the kitchen, boy. The stuff is there, and I'll mix it in a washtub if you say the word."

They compromised on tall glasses, bickering amiably on measurements and proportions. But when the drinks were mixed, Farge seated himself across the porcelain table, and the laughter died out of his eyes.

"All right, Curt," he said quietly, "let's have it. You didn't come here on any social call. And there's a shadow of plain horror in your eyes. What's up?"

Temple told him, beginning with the mystery of meteorites bombarding Kansas, and covering everything that had followed the disappearance of the Culwain Expedition. At the mention of the Crimson Plague, Farge's lips thinned.

"I saw the Plague," he said harshly. You think those *things* caused that, too?"

"I'm sure of it—and just as sure bacteriologists can't find Plague germs because there aren't any germs. He rushed on, ignoring Farge's startled grunt. "Look, they offer to transport victims to the Moon, ostensibly for burial. How do we know that's their purpose? Suppose this is all a hellish pattern, a scheme to get human bodies to the Moon for some ghastly use? Can you imagine a better way to accomplish it?"

Farge set down his empty glass with a shaking hand.

"Go on," he said hoarsely. "I'm crazy enough to keep on listening as long as you make two and two equal four."

HE REMAINED silent until Temple had finished, examining the black projector case without comment. Then he took a deep breath.

"Count me in, Curt," he said quietly. "I'll do anything for a chance to take this thing apart and see what makes it tick."

"You'll get that chance. Is your school out for the summer? I've lost track of time these past weeks."

"Closed last week—and twenty miles out of town I've got the finest private lab in the country, with everything in it but a rhumbatron, Curt. It's all yours. But what can you hope to accomplish?"

"We've got to duplicate Lansdon's detector that makes the entities visible. Until we can see them, we're helpless. We can't fight them, can't analyze them, can't even perfect a weapon until we get that detector."

"Sweet job," Farge growled. "You don't know how it's made and by all the laws of physics, it can't exist, anyhow. You ought to have one of those entities, as you call them, for a guinea pig."

"I have," Temple said quietly, and described his kidnapping of Lee Mason.

Farge leaped to his feet, his chair crashing backward.

"My Lord. That poor girl tied up out there all this time!"

"Easy, Al. That 'poor girl' would slit your throat and mine the moment she got loose. That isn't Lee Mason out there. It's a hellish, inhuman thing that's usurped her body. God only knows if her real personality still exists. Maybe without the entity she'd die or—or have no mind left. I've tried not to think of that because we've got to go on, got to smash the plot behind all this"—his voice dropped—"regardless of cost."

Farge gripped his shoulder a moment in silent sympathy.

"We'll fight," he said at last. "But what about us, Curt? What's to prevent an entity's seizing either of us?"

"In your case, nothing. They've tried to get into my brain and failed. Tonight I figured out why, and tomorrow I'll try to equip you with the same defense. Meanwhile, until I've got it ready, I don't even dare tell you what it is. The big risk is that the entity will leave Lee and run away before we can accomplish anything, destroying her as a revenge blow against me. I've tried to block that, though my efforts are horribly feeble, Al.

"The main thing is speed and more speed. Can you get ready to go to your lab right away? I've seen those poor dupes at camp rushing their jobs and. I know what we're up against in trying to beat them."

"Ready in ten minutes, Curt. My family's out of town so I haven't a single tie to hold me."

An hour later they stood in the finest private laboratory Temple had ever seen. A spare storeroom, hastily supplied with bed and dresser, became a

comfortable but reasonably escape-proof prison for Lee Mason. Only a bank of steel shelves on one wall bothered Farge.

"She could rip those down and make a club of that metal edging, Curt," he protested.

"We'll risk it. I'm gambling that as long as the entity thinks it has a chance to smash us, it will stay quiet to watch our next moves. I'm deadly afraid of having it leave her now, maybe destroy her body in retaliation, and take up some new angle of attack we can't guard against."

He drove a clenched fist into his palm.

"Damn it, it's all guesswork, Al, and it scares me! How do I know I'm right? I thought I saw a ball of light on a man's head. On that t' in base I've built up a whole beautiful theory—that might be utterly cockeyed: What *is* an entity? What are its powers? I've pieced odds and ends of evidence into a composite picture of them but how do I know it isn't a picture they deliberately created to fool me? Maybe that thing in there is communicating with its companions right now, planning some terrible attack. I don't think it is—but I don't know. It's all blind shooting in the dark."

"We've shot in the dark all our lives, Curt," Farge said soberly. "We've never seen an atom, yet we've built up a workable blueprint of its structre by which we can build them or tear them down. It's just another job of that kind. Let's sleep a couple of hours and get at it."

FARGE went to his room but Temple stayed behind, intent on some mysterious and urgent task of his own. In the dining room of Farge's living quarters he found a set of sterling silver dinnerware.

This he melted down in the electric furnace and molded into a thin skullcap of pure silver. He handed the cap to Farge when the professor came back to the lab, rubbing his eyes.

"Wear this every moment, day or night," Temple said, "Unless my theory is way off, the entities can't get hold of your brain through a silver screen. I've got one, holding the fracture at the back of my skull, and it's the only reason I can think of for my immunity."

"But why silver?" Farge demanded, donning it gingerly.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Temple admitted, "except that silver is opaque to ultra-violet radiations beyond thirty-three hundred Angstrom Units. Maybe that's a clue to their makeup."

"It's worth trying," Farge agreed. "But how come, if the entities are so smart, they don't know that?"

"I think they do. They must. But the only chance they had to do anything about it was the two days I was a prisoner and during that time their attention was pretty well taken up with the return of the rocket and negotiations for funeral flights. Besides, there's no surgeon in their group, and only a surgeon could remove my screen safely."

He handed over a rough sketch of the entity detector as he remembered it.

"It's a stereoscope," he told Farge, "that's built to superimpose an invisible image over the visible one to show them both in correct physical relationship. I'm positive of that. The clear glass lens on the visible side won't give us any trouble. The black lens must have been of Wood's nickel oxide glass. That's a clue, because we know Wood's glass will transmit only ultra-violet light and filter out the visible rays. I have a feeling the real problem lies in the violet film that stood behind it."

Farge pondered, chewing his lip.

"Well, films of the alkali metals transmit shortwave light below the visible spectrum. But you say this film had a violet hue, which lets out lithium, sodium, potassium and rubidium. They block all visible light and are, therefore, a dead black. Caesium, the heaviest of that group, lets some visible violet pass, which gives it a violet color. But that sounds too easy, Curt."

"It's a starting point. We'll try all the alkali metals with every known type of

fluorescent screen, Al, and see where we get."

Farge nodded eagerly.

"If we can get something besides Xs to put in a formula, I'll solve it by mathematics, Curt. And while we're waiting for a Wood's lens and stock of alkali films, we can test for ultra-violet radiation. It may affect a photograph plate or emit measurable electrons or react on fluorescent pigments by direct bombardment."

They plunged enthusiastically into myriad tests. Farge was optimistic, but a worried frown creased Temple's forehead.

"Have you noticed how quiet Lee has been?" he asked, the second day after arrival at the laboratory. "She's stopped snarling and fighting and just sits there with a sort of sly smile on her lips while we put her through those tests. It's plain proof that we're so far from the right track that we aren't even worth worrying about."

"I've noticed it," Farge growled. "But one of these fine days we'll change that smile."

XII

HURLING himself back into the endless quest, Temple said little, but always in the back of his mind was the haunting fear that maybe the entity had fled, leaving only a graven memory pattern on Lee's mind to direct her actions. Or maybe the thing was in touch with the camp, directing a smashing blow that might fall when they least expected it.

The radio brought ominous reports from the outside world. Apparently the entities had met Temple's challenge by redoubling their deadly activities.

The Crimson Plague struck out with increased fury, spreading in widening circles to engulf major centers of population with horrible results. The toll of victims skyrocketed.

The funerary Moon flights became daily affairs, and work was rushed on the second, larger rocket. New and faster trucks ranged the devastated areas, loading victims like cordwood.

A Vingrove woman was committed to the state insane hospital for insisting she had seen her husband, one of the earlier Plague victims who presumably had been taken to the Moon, alive and working at the camp.

Farge and Temple listened to the reports without audible comment, but the lines deepened in their faces, and somehow they managed to increase their efforts another notch. They cut sleeping time to three hours out of the twenty-four, and ate only when weakness reminded them of the need for fuel on the *fierce fire of their energy*.

But at the end of the week they faced the grim truth.

"We've flopped," Farge said bitterly. "A week of trying everything without an inch of progress to show for it. We don't even know if the thing's still there. We can't see it, can't get a flicker of energy response on any indicator. We're right back where we started, Curt—nowhere!"

Temple, reeling from weariness and nerve strain, stared at the floor in silence. Abruptly he stiffened.

"Wait! I described the entity in terms of physical light and energy and we've been sticking to that basis."

"What else could it be?" Farge demanded dully.

"Mental energy. Biophysics has proved that thoughts are electrical—or at least produce measurable currents. The entity apparently merges itself with brain activities, so why couldn't it be pure brain energy?"

Farge looked startled. "But biophysics has *detected* mental and nervous currents. We can't get a response of any kind. Any mind energy doesn't fall in the ultra-violet band, anyhow. It was a good theory, though."

"A sound theory," Temple barked, electrified by his new line of thought. "Look," a generator produces electricity, but it isn't electrical itself. Maybe the entity is the generator, without itself be-

ing measurable radiation.

"My theory would still hold, then. And as to the ultra-violet range, who knows where mind energy does lie? Or suppose that's part of a whole undiscovered energy spectrum, existing coincidentally with our familiar spectrum and only touching in the ultra-violet band? That's fantastic, of course, but I'm simply digging up theories that fit what facts we do know—and that fits."

"But try and prove it—or use it—with existing instruments or tools."

TEMPLE was staring at the polished base of a bench lamp. He started abruptly.

"I just did prove it," he barked. "Quick! Lock Lee in her room and get back here. We're on our way!"

Farge trotted back a few moments later, his eyes shining with excitement.

"You hit something, Curt. What was it?"

"The answer!" Temple exulted. "I was watching the reflection of Lee's face when I sugges' d mental energy and an undiscovered spectrum. She nearly screamed. Her expression proves we're on the right track at last."

Farge shook his head. "But that's an unknown science, Curt. We don't know its fundamentals, we haven't any instruments—"

"Then we'll invent instruments," Temple roared. "You didn't find anything inside that projector except a gold grid in a sliding frame and a slab of some strange crystal—no batteries or generators of any kind. Nevertheless, the answer's there. I don't believe that machine generates energy at all. I think it's a sort of burning glass proposition that concentrates natural energy from the atmosphere into a beam. We'll try doping it out on that basis.

"And there's one screen we've never tried. Element eighty-seven—moldavium. It's one of the alkali metals but its properties aren't known because it's never been isolated. Maybe the entities isolated it, and if they have, we can. Order a stock right away in the purest available form. . . ."

It was on the following afternoon that Temple got his idea.

"Cosmic rays!" he suddenly roared at Farge in the midst of an experiment. "What a dunce I've been. That's the radiation that kills the entities. I'm positive of it!"

"But I don't see—" Farge gaped at him.

"Look, stones have been falling on Kansas for centuries, haven't they, with a concentration too great to be accidental. That implies intelligent bombardment, aimed there for a purpose. The obvious answer is—the entities. But no entities ever appeared before. Why?"

THE ADVENTURES OF

"You mean," Farge exclaimed, "that all the previous meteorites started out with loads of entities, too? Then why—"

"Because the entities couldn't survive the trip through space. Something destroyed them, and the logical answer is the direct, unshielded impact of cosmic rays. This last swarm of stones was different from any that ever landed before. They were coated with a strange, heavy radioactive coating. Suppose that was some newly discovered shield against cosmic rays. That fits my theory and accounts for the entities' surviving."

"But, Curt, what can we do with it? We can't generate artificial cosmic rays. Their voltage is 'way too high. And we can't concentrate them except with a couple of hundred tons of magnets."

"That projector!" Temple barked. "If it can tap one range of free energy, maybe it can tap more. You've got a Wilson Cloud Chamber with a Geiger-Muller counter on it. Start shooting blasts of the projector into it and photographing for explosion trails. Change the setting of that sliding grid each time and see if you get a measurable response at any point."

As though Temple's ideas had supplied a key, the door suddenly swung open for them.

Two days later, on a film of semi-refined moldavium, they saw a dull violet glow that moved when Lee Mason moved her head.

The entity!

The image was crude and it lacked the stereoscopic effect, but it gave them all they asked for. Now they could apply themselves to the discovery of a weapon.

Too tired to celebrate their first victory, Temple and Farge hung the photographic negatives of their latest Cloud Chamber shots up to dry and tumbled into bed without undressing.

And that night the entity struck back.

SOMETIME during the night, Temple awoke, bathed in cold perspiration, his lungs hammering for air and his nostrils aflame with stinging torment. He lay for a moment, gasping and blinking, watching what looked like an inexplicable parade of gray ghosts across the faint light of the window.

Then his brain suddenly threw off the dregs of sleep and filled with the horror of what he saw. He sprang out of bed, snatched open the hall door and staggered back from a solid wall of gray smoke that filled the corridor.

Fire! The place was on fire. There was not a sound to indicate whether or not Farge or Lee were alive or conscious.

With cold terror plucking at his nerves, Temple crooked his arm over nose and mouth for partial protection

[*Turn page*]

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and fumbled his way down the hall to Farge's bedroom. A close-fitting door had kept the smoke out of that room and a gentle snore from the long cylinder of covers on the bed brought to Temple a surge of relief. He sprang across and clutched Farge's shoulder.

"Curt, is that you?" Farge sat up, blinking and coughing. "What's wrong?"

"Fire! I don't know where it started or how far it's got. I'm going to get Lee out. You try to save the instruments and negatives. Hurry!"

"Wait!" Farge stumbled to the bathroom and came back with two dripping towels. "This'll keep some of the smoke out of your lungs. Come on."

With the wet towels plastered over their faces, they stumbled downstairs through a solid tunnel of smoke. There were no sounds of fire, no ominous glow of flames.

With cold terror in his heart, Temple stumbled to the storeroom door and fumbled for the knob. It turned under his touch and slid away. The jamb felt jagged and rough. A grim suspicion flamed in his mind.

Light filtered through the pall of smoke as Farge found the switch working. By the glow, Temple saw that the prison was empty, the door a wreck where sharp pieces of the smashed steel shelving had been used to gouge away the lock. Lee had done this, his mind pounded dully. She had smashed her way out, started the fire, and fled.

Farge came stumbling through the smoke, a tangle of wreckage clutched in his arms. He was almost sobbing.

"Curt! The detector and projector—smashed into a million bits. Somebody—" He broke off, staring at the empty room.

"Come on," Temple plunged into the smoke, snatched a fire-extinguisher and raced for the basement stairs. "Phone the Fire Department! Maybe we can hold it until they get here!"

"Can't," Farge panted in his wake. "She ripped out the telephone and smashed it, too. We're cut off."

They found the fire smoldering in a pile of broken boxes heaped high against the wood steps of the basement. Twisted papers and shavings had laid the foundation for an inferno that would have been beyond control in another twenty minutes.

Temple took in the situation at a glance and thrust the extinguisher into Farge's arms.

"Take over! This was started so recently I may be able to catch her. I've got to!"

Both heard it, then—the wail of a car starter that broke abruptly into the explosive bark of firing cylinders. It came from just outside the house.

"The truck!" Temple shouting, plunging up the stairs. "She's getting away in the Culwain truck I brought from camp!"

XIII

HE BURST out into the graying dawn to see Lee Mason in the truck's cab, racing the motor while she used both hands to mesh the cold-stiffened gears. The lever ground into place when he was still a hundred feet away. The truck lurched ahead.

Temple redoubled his speed. He made a desperate flying leap, and his fingers caught at the edge of the window frame. For a moment he clung, kicking for a foothold on the running board, buffeted by the jouncing of the accelerating truck.

Suddenly Lee Mason leaned out the open window. She was driving with one hand and her other clutched a spark plug wrench. The wrench was small and light but, driven by desperation, its impact against his jaw was stunning.

Reeling back, Temple felt his slender grip on the truck window torn loose. Then he fell to the ground with breath-taking force. Dimly he heard the roar of the speeding truck fade away into the distance and tried to stumble to his rubbery legs to follow.

Farge, racing out from the house,

held him back.

"Easy, Curt," he soothed. "You can't catch her on foot and there isn't another car within miles. Why didn't I drive my car out instead of riding here on the truck with you?"

He led Temple into the laboratory and went around opening windows to clear the smoke. Then he vanished into the dark room.

Outside, a bird burst into sudden frantic song. It shocked Temple to realize, for the first time in weeks, that outside his tight little sphere of heartache and struggle there was still a world where birds could sing in the dawn. He dropped his face into his hands.

Farge, coming back, put a hand to his shoulder.

"It's losing Lee that hurts," Temple's voice came muffled through his hands. "Losing my chance to save her, now when we were on the verge of success. Now she's not only beyond reach but she knows everything we've done and planned so she can beat us with one smashing blow."

"I hate to tell you this," Farge said tightly. "But I just looked at the last negatives and while I haven't had the time for Johnson asymmetry measurements, I'd say we had something with an energy value well over five billion volts. That could only be cosmic rays, Curt. We—we had it—and now we've lost it, forever. There isn't enough of that projector left to work with."

"What?" Temple's head jerked up and his red-veined eyes were aflame. "Allen, I've got another projector, one I snatched that same night at camp. I've kept it hidden so the entity could never learn I had it through reading your mind. Quick, find out what setting you used and we'll start over again."

"Whoopee!" Farge yelled in a burst of relief. "And Curt, I stuck a scrap of surplus moldavium away in the safe last night. It's big enough for a small detector."

"Fine. Fix one I can wear on my forehead like a visor, so I can see through it by simply tilting my head. That will leave my hands free to handle the projector."

"Curt" — Farge's face was sober — "you can't buck that crowd alone, even with the projector. They've got guns, paralysis beams, and an absolute indifference to human life. You couldn't hope to face them all."

"I've got to," Temple said grimly. "Our last chance of getting any outside help or confidence is gone. You heard the radio last night. Three outstanding scientists publicly questioned the motives of the group in Arizona. And in each case, the scientist issued a retraction and apology within twenty-four hours. You know what that means. An entity seized each man. From now on, that will happen to anyone who stands in their way. It would take us weeks to persuade public figures to wear silver skull caps, and long before we succeeded, the entities would have struck a counter-blow.

"No, Allen, it's on our shoulders completely. Whatever is behind this horrible infiltration of alien beings will only be stopped if *we* stop it. They've got the public behind them now, by stopping the Crimson Plague wherever their trucks pick up the bodies. The whole nation is convinced that its future depends on the group at camp. We've got to strike first and justify ourselves afterward."

THEY worked for a time in silence. From the radio came frequent announcements, most of them dealing with either the Crimson Plague or the science group. No other news seemed of importance, for where the group trucks collected the bodies of victims, the Plague died out. Beyond the widening circle of their efforts, however, it raged unchecked.

"What's behind it?" Farge groaned. "You think the entities cause the Plague —but how? What do they want with bodies?"

Temple answered grimly, "I'm posi-

tive, now, that they cause it. Probably by some control of the victim's involuntary nervous system that induces hyper blood pressure and catalepsy. At the start, remember, they seized those farmers, the Solles and their hired man, to use as chauffeurs and kidnapers. When they were through with their dupes, they simply wiped out dangerous memories and discarded them.

"I think the Crimson Plague is a similar and more hideous type of recruiting which they've developed in order to supply themselves with ordinary rough labor. I think it's only on scientists whose brains they need that they bother with the type of mind-seizure we've met on Lee and the rest."

"Catalepsy?" Farge gasped. "You mean—"

"I mean I don't believe Crimson Plague victims are really dead. I believe an entity swoops down on a crowd, selects its victims and leaves them helpless, to be hauled away as slaves to more entities. That's the only way the pattern fits."

"But Curt, all those poor devils who were buried, cremated, autopsied. They were—"

"Murdered!" Temple snarled. "Murdered while an entity hovered close, waiting to strike again to convince a panic-stricken people that only transportation to Moon could check the Plague. And their fiendish plan has worked like a dream. The group has the public so sold on them as public saviors now, that we'd be thrown in an insane asylum for suggesting the truth. Our only hope is to smash the entities, get Lee and those others free of the control, and then destroy the source of them on the Moon."

Half an hour later as Temple was fitting the completed detector over his head, Farge threw down his screw-driver and drew a deep breath.

"There it is, Curt. Identically the same adjustment of grid and crystal as I had in that other detector when I got the cosmic ray path in the Cloud Chamber. It won't take long to verify the physical accuracy."

His face clouded. "But Curt, have you thought of this? Even if we get what looks on our plates like cosmic rays, how can we be sure? We've already uncovered new energy fields that we never knew existed. How can we know this isn't something utterly different, something that would instantly kill anyone it touched? You won't dare use the projector on Lee or those others without some kind of guinea pig test."

"There'll be a test," Temple said rightly. "It's my idea, my theory from the beginning. I'll be the guinea pig. If anything goes wrong, you'll have to carry on alone, that's all."

"But, Curt, you can't risk that! An energy bombardment of five to ten billion volts might smash the brain cells, kill you instantly, or even destroy your mind. I won't let you risk that, boy! We'll get some lab animals, first."

"There isn't time," Temple interrupted harshly. "Tomorrow night their big rocket starts hauling bodies. At any moment the entities may strike back at us. We can't waste days making lab tests now. The minute these plates are developed, I make the test on myself, and that's final. One life, more or less, doesn't count for much now, considering what's in the balance. If it works on me, I'm leaving at once."

From behind them, a quiet voice said, "I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to leave, if I were you."

Temple and Farge whirled simultaneously.

JUST inside the laboratory door stood two young men with grim faces and sharp, watchful eyes. One of them cradled the ominous bulk of a submachine-gun suggestively in his arms. The other held only a sheaf of folded papers.

Beside them stood Lee Mason, an expression of grim triumph on her face.

"What—who—" Farge ejaculated.

"Tillotson and Rowe," the man with the papers introduced, "of the Federal

Bureau of Investigation. We have warrants here for your arrest on charges of kidnaping and unlawful detention of the person of one Lee Mason, who has sworn out warrants now being served. Will you come along quietly?"

Curt Temple stood frozen, feeling the blood drain from his face. Lee had done this—not Lee, but the entity who controlled her. She had rushed to town after setting the fire and had organized this crushing blow.

Beside him, Farge suddenly straightened and threw back his head. His eyes were cold.

"This is either the beginning or the end," he said distinctly. "And there's only one way to find out. If this works, Curt, you'll know how to carry on. So long."

Before anyone could move to stop him, he lifted the untested projector and snapped it full in his own face.

"Allen!" Temple cried. "For God's sake, don't!"

His voice broke as Farge swayed and crumpled to the floor, the black case tumbling from his limp hands. Ignoring the menacing lift of the submachine-gun, Temple dropped to his knees and lifted Farge's head. He saw the blank, relaxed features through a mist of pain and there was a dull roaring in his ears.

"Tilly, he did the Dutch right in front of us!" cried Rowe. "But for hell's sake, what with?"

Lee Mason broke the shocked tension. She screamed shrilly and pointed a shaking hand.

"Get that thing! Grab it quickly! It's a horrible deadly weapon they've been working on. A death ray! It can kill!"

The FBI men were dazed and uncertain at the swift turn of events but Lee was the complainant who had sought their aid. At her frantic cry, they both surged forward, intent on grabbing the mysterious case at Temple's side.

At that instant, Farge stirred. His eyes opened and his lips twisted into a smile.

"Success," he murmured softly.

The one word drove a blaze of new strength into Temple's numbed muscles. Farge was alive. The mysterious emanation of the projector, whether cosmic ray or not, whether destructive to the entities or not, was at least not fatal.

Still on his knees, Temple whirled and snatched the projector from the clutching fingers of the two FBI men. His swift movement caught them flat-footed, with Tillotson still empty-handed and the submachine-gun pointing at the floor. Before they could rectify the error, Temple tilted up the case and pressed the button.

There was no visible beam, no sound of unleashed power, but the two leaping figures stopped as though halted by a stone wall, and tumbled into limp heaps. Lee Mason screamed in sudden terror and whirled toward the door.

Cold-eyed and tight-lipped, Temple leveled the projector again and snapped the catch. She fell in the doorway, crumpling without a sound.

And in the violet screen of the detector, still dangling over Temple's eyes, a glowing ball of violet light suddenly flared up and vanished in a single burst of intolerable radiance.

"Curt!" Farge bawled, scrambling to his feet. "You killed it! You destroyed it! I saw it for an instant with my naked eye—like a little cloud of glowing mist that whipped away. Curt, it works! "We've won!"

"We've lost," Temple barked, "if we don't get out of here before these Federal men wake up! They'd haul us in and keep us all locked up for weeks trying to get this thing straightened out. Come on. They must have a car."

He stooped, threw Lee Mason's limp figure over his shoulder and raced out with Farge at his heels. Outside, a powerful sedan stood in the driveway with motor purring softly.

Temple dropped Lee to the front seat cushions beside Farge and climbed in. The big car roared away from the laboratory at reckless speed.

"Where can you go?" Farge panted,

twisting around to stare out the back window. "They'll be up and organizing a state-wide hunt within minutes. They'll block every highway!"

"There's only one place to go," Temple said through set teeth. "Straight to camp. We've got the detector and the weapon and temporary freedom. It will take these two at least half an hour to reach a telephone that works. By that time we can be past Phoenix and well on the way south toward Vingrove. There's no time to waste, now!"

XIV

BETWEEN them, Lee Mason stirred and her eyes opened—eyes that were clear and bright and alive with the vivid spark of her personality.

"Curt!" She clutched at his arm with a little cry of happiness. "Curt, you freed me from that horrible slavery. Oh, Curt, you don't know how I watched you fight and prayed that you'd win, even though I couldn't do a thing to help you. But the ghastly things it made me do to you, while I was helpless!"

She broke off with a sob at the anguished memories. Temple grinned happily, patting her hand. He had been horribly afraid of this moment of awakening, afraid that the entity would take a last revenge by wiping out Lee's mind or memory.

But apparently destruction had come so swiftly and unexpectedly that the entity had had no time for vengeance. Her mind seemed completely free and clear.

"Forget it all, honey," he said soothingly. "Forget the whole thing! It's over, now, and before morning we'll have the others free, as well. Wear this cap every moment, day and night, and they can never seize your mind again." He handed over a duplicate of the silver cap he had made for Farge. "I've carried this a long time, waiting for a chance to give it to you. Also to some of the others, if I couldn't reach you. Now, honey, I want you to meet the bravest and swellest friend who was ever put on this earth."

Lee turned, knowing at once who he meant, and laid a hand over Farge's.

"I know," she said softly. "I watched you, too, Mr. Farge. What you did back here, risking your life or more to try that untested projector—it was wonderful!"

Farge reddened uncomfortably and interrupted the praise with a sudden fit of coughing. Temple grinned and rescued him.

"Lee, tell me about the entities—everything you can that will help us defeat them. Where did they come from? What are they?"

"But Curt, I can't! That's the horrible part of it. I never did know what was really happening. That night at camp, I felt something icy digging into my brain. Then everything went black, and when I awoke, I felt normal again except that I couldn't command my own body any more. I could *think* something I wanted to say, but I couldn't say it. I could plan places to go and things to do, but I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even stop myself from doing the things I did do."

"Then you couldn't feel the entity as —as a personality?" Curt Temple demanded, his eyes showing his disappointment. "You had no sudden rush of additional knowledge or anything like that?"

"Not a thing, Curt. I made one of those projectors—as we all did—but my brain simply couldn't figure out what my own hands were doing, nor why. The only time I really felt the *thing's* presence was a time or two when problems had to be worked out mentally. Then I started thinking about the problem in response to some command I couldn't analyze or resist, and suddenly a whole flood of energy would pour into my brain! My thought-processes would speed up until I actually couldn't keep up with them. Then suddenly out of the spinning jumble, would come the answer."

"I thought so," Temple muttered. "Pure mental energy, Allen, as we figured. But Lee, when you talk to one another about the affairs of the entities, is your conversation simply—"

"Exactly the same," she interrupted. "Words flash into my mind, and I speak them without knowing why or, often, what they mean. But I think the entities also converse with one another by some psychic means, too. Often a group of us would stand together for hours without moving or speaking a word, but I'd get a feeling of thoughts fairly flying through the air around us, and suddenly everyone would rush off on some new project."

"Then," Farge demanded, "you haven't any idea what their purpose is? You don't know why they invaded Earth?"

"I haven't any idea." She shivered uncontrollably. "But I have a feeling it's horrible, ghastly!"

IT WAS not until late afternoon that they ran into the grim man-hunt organized by the FBI. A few miles north of Vingrove they raced over a hill and faced a trap. A state police coupé was parked on the pavement, narrowing it to one lane, and two uniformed patrolmen flanked a huge portable "Stop" sign that blocked the rest of the highway.

"Duck low," was all Temple said. "We can't be stopped now."

He slowed deceptively, then jammed the throttle to the floor. The heavy sedan leaped ahead like a living thing in a roaring surge of unleashed power. There were startled yells, a splintering crash, the grinding impact of steel on steel.

Then they went through, racing down the highway with one fender flapping and the speedometer needle near the hundred mark as lead thudded futilely into the back of the sedan. Behind them, a wrecked barricade, an overturned police coupé, and two khaki-uniformed wild men vanished into distance.

Shortly after dusk they camped, and joined a procession of vehicles of all kinds jamming the trail. Temple pulled up beside a man changing a tire and leaned out.

"Where's everybody going?" he asked.

"Going to watch the new rocket take off at nine o'clock," his informant grunted. "They set the first trip ahead a day and everybody's out to see it from the hills."

"Come on!" Temple said to his companions, and sent the sedan leaping ahead, bounding over the hard-packed sand to avoid the traffic on the trail. "There isn't a moment to lose if we want to save some two hundred poor Plague victims from slavery!"

A short distance from the gate to the camp, he stopped the car. He and Farge climbed into the back, crouching on the floor while Lee slid under the wheel. Temple held the projector ready.

"It's up to you," he whispered grimly to Lee. "Try to make the gateman shut off the current and open the gate for you. If we can get in without raising an alarm, our chances of success are infinitely better than if we have to crash the gate and face a pitched battle."

He adjusted the angle of the detector on his forehead and patted the flat case of the projector.

"If an entity comes to investigate, I'll handle it," he added grimly.

"I should be able to put it over," Lee said tightly. "Lord knows, I've had enough practice."

She stopped the sedan close to the gate and leaned out as a surly, beetle-browed guard appeared.

"Jonas," she snapped, coldly imperious, "the gate at once. I have just escaped my captors and have important news."

In the rear, Temple and Farge held their breaths as only silence answered.

"Curt," Lee whispered suddenly, her voice ragged, "what's wrong? All he does is stand and stare without moving. Did you do anything?"

Temple raised up for a quick glance, and his breath caught.

"Easy, sweet," he murmured. "There are two free entities floating this way to investigate. That guard's own is still in his brain, waiting for their report, I'll have to shoot."

He lifted the projector. They all saw the twin wraiths of glowing mist that suddenly appeared, then whipped away as the terrible bombardment destroyed their alien atoms.

Simultaneously, the gateman yelled and whirled toward the camp phone inside the guard both. He had almost reached the phone when a blast from Temple's projector destroyed the guiding entity and sent him sprawling.

"That means open war," Temple snapped. "Everybody out!"

As they leaped from the car, he slid under the wheel and sent the heavy sedan lurching back. When he judged he had sufficient run, he slammed it forward and jerked the dash throttle wide open. The big limousine thundered across the sand, bearing down irresistibly on the steel mesh gate.

TWENTY feet from the gate, Temple jumped. He struck the sand and rolled over and over, arms shielding his face. An instant later the sedan smashed headlong into the barrier.

There was a blaze of searing, roaring, high tension flame that momentarily engulfed the car. Then the flame died, the gate went down with a crash, and alarm bells burst out from the heart of the camp. Temple sprang to his feet as Lee and Fargo raced up.

"Stay here, you two!" he snapped. "You wouldn't stand a chance in there without a weapon. I'll handle things."

"Nuts to you," Lee panted cheerfully. "Allen has his tools and he says he can convert any paralysis gun into an entity-destroyer in five minutes. Get going! It's almost eight-thirty right now."

There was no time to argue. Temple fought down the quick stab of fear for her safety and hurdled the wrecked gate. Behind him, Farge snatched a paralysis projector from the sprawled gateman and dug at it with eager fingers as he ran.

Ahead, a knot of men burst from the camp and raced toward them down the road. A gun slammed, and lead whistled over their heads. Temple tried a blast of the projector, but the distance was still too great. More shots came, uncomfortably close.

"Stay here!" he pleaded with the other two, between panting breaths. "They haven't any compunction about shooting to kill!"

Their answer was an added burst of speed that carried them, dodging and twisting, straight into the hail of lead from the advancing guards. Temple groaned and tried the projector again, without any great hope. The range was still extreme.

But, miraculously, this time there were bursts of violet and the figures pitched to the sand and lay sprawled and still. It was grotesque, a slaughter without bloodshed, a mock carnage. Temple hurdled the still forms with Lee at his heels. Farge stopped for a quick search of the bodies, then caught up with them, panting.

"No paralysis projectors!" he cried. "Seems odd."

"I know why," Lee panted. "They only had—five crystals. Curt—stole two projectors—that night. Only three—left."

Temple's eyes were on the looming bulk of the new rocket hangar that dwarfed the old structure, poking the silvery snout of its monstrous burden toward the waiting sky. To him it was a symbol—the symbol of countless thousands of Plague victims, the living dead who would be doomed to lifetimes of slavery if he failed. He must not fail!

Suddenly his eyes widened and his steps faltered. The silvery nose of the projecting rocket was reddening, glowing with reflected flames, and the still night air was carying a faint mutter of distant thunder to his ears. He choked.

"The rocket!" he groaned. "It's taking off!"

His words were drowned in the Titantic thunder, his eyes dazzled by the incredible brilliance of the great ship's take-off. He saw it, riding the curving scimitar of the flames up into the stars. Then it was gone and the three of them stood gaping, stunned.

After a moment they broke the spell and raced on. They burst into the main camp street and a blue beam licked at them from the shadows. Temple fired a burst from the projector and an entity flamed to death in the darkness. Farge snatched another paralysis projector from the sprawled figure as they ran past.

Suddenly Dr. Eno Rocossen burst from a shack ahead of them and ran madly toward the smaller rocket hangar. He carried a projector, but made no effort to use it, all his energies concentrated on flight.

"Stop him!" Temple roared. "If he gets the small rocket away we're licked! They can stay on the Moon, beyond our reach and whip those hundreds of Plague victims into an army for some new invasion!"

XV

STAGGERING, gasping, every breath a flaming agony, Temple and his two companions pounded doggedly on, cutting down the distance between them and the racing professor. Temple lifted his projector and then let it fall. He couldn't risk blasting Rocossen's entity, destroying the knowledge of how to operate and guide the rocket.

Suddenly their way was blocked by a knot of figures plunging into the street ahead of them, cutting them off from their quarry. There was Jacobs, pistol in hand, others of the university group —Mullane, Davoe, Meeker, Lansdon, each raising a paralysis projector.

Temple rayed down Lansdon and Jacobs in two bursts. Then the others were on them, swinging clubs and fists in wild fury.

"They're trying to cut us off!" Farge howled, slugging toe to toe with Meeker. "We'll hold them, Curt. Get through and stop Rocossen!"

Temple drilled in, sent Davoe reeling, and flashed down the street. Rocossen was just vanishing into the smaller hangar.

Desperately Temple increased his speed. It was obvious the rest of the entities had fled to the Moon on the big rocket.

If Rocossen got away, all hope of contact would be cut off. Human brains could never hope to duplicate the Moon flights in time to smash another invasion attempt.

Temple burst into the hangar and saw Rocossen darting up the gangplank toward the open port of the waiting craft. Curt roared a command to halt. Rocossen faltered at the sound and swiveled a contorted face to glare at his pursuer. The paralysis gun he carried leaped up and flamed.

Temple tried to dodge, slipped, and felt the beam's searing touch against his left arm and side. He stumbled, plunged forward onto the foot of the gangplank and heard his projector clatter from numbed fingers into the depths of the rocket pit!

Weaponless, his left side numb and useless, he sprawled precariously on the narrow gangplank as Rocossen vanished into the ship. Hydraulic pistons gurgled to the rising whine of machinery from somewhere inside.

Beneath Temple the gangplank shifted and swayed. Pistons were inexorably drawing the great port lock into its seat, dislodging the gangplank. In a moment plank and its living burden would slip free to plunge to the pit below—into a hell of seething flames when the take-off rockets blasted.

With sweat pouring down his face, Temple clawed his right hand into the iron gangplank and inched himself ahead toward the narrowing port. He *had* to get inside, *had* to stop Rocossen before the rockets fired! And the closing port was still six feet away.

A scant inch still held the gangplank in place.

Behind him, Farge and Lee burst into the hangar with the three other scientists fighting and clawing to hold them back. They took in the situation at a glance. Farge swung around, blocking the doorway, battling desperately to hold his ground as Lee broke free and raced toward the rocket.

On the gangplank, Temple saw the last half-inch of overlap between gangplank and rising lock narrow inexorably. He clenched his teeth, dragging his helpless body another six inches.

Behind him, someone flashed up the teetering plank, caught at his shoulders and literally hurled him across the remaining gap and through the closing port to the rocket's floor. He saw Lee Mason, panting, grinning at him through bruised lips as she rested on hands and knees from her last desperate dash.

Then the gangplank crashed away outside, the pistons wheezed sharply, and the great lock chugged into its seat. Simultaneously, deafening thunder burst around them and the floor beneath them quivered. In a burst of frantic horror, Temple struggled to his knees. He had to stop that takeoff!

The rockets' roar deepened. Under him the floor leaped violently and some Titantic, irresistible force plucked them up and hurled them back along a shadowy corridor. Temple knew one instant of blinding agony, then a terrific impact smashed the breath from his lungs and the consciousness of failure from his brain. . . .

CURT TEMPLE awoke sharply with the salt taste of blood in his throat, a numbing agony through his bruised body, and a cold terror in his heart. Lee —Lee Mason! She had rushed in to help him. The terrible acceleration of the take-off had hurled them toward the rocket's tail with unbearable force, enough force to smash a human body to pulp.

His eyes opened dully, widened incredulously at what they saw. The entire rear bulkhead of the rocket was covered by a great, thick mat of some resilient material, bolstered by heavy coil springs, and it was against this life-saving cushion that they had been driven.

He saw Lee's slender figure beside him, still pressed tight against the padding, her lashes fluttering against waxen cheeks as consciousness returned.

With a prayer of thankfulness, Temple pushed himself erect to reach her side. The slight effort he exerted shot him up like a jack-in-the-box and left his bruised body floating gently in mid-air. Temple's breath caught.

They were already beyond Earth's gravity field, blasting through outer space. Behind and around him, the steady thunder of the rockets was driving them further and further from Earth—further from hope.

"Curt!" It was Lee, her eyes wide and startled. "What—how . . . Oh, we're outside gravity!" She pushed herself out into the air beside him, laughing shakily. "What a funny feeling, not to weigh anything."

Temple caught her hand with a groan of anguish.

"Lee! Lee! Why did you jump inside? You should have pushed me in and run back. There was time."

"Huh!" she said, crinkling her nose in a grin. "And lose you just when I got you back? Don't be silly. Besides, how do I know but what some Moon hussy might not vamp you? It was a full moon, I remember, that got you to propose to me that night." Her face sobered. "But it was a dirty trick to leave Allen to fight those three alone."

"Don't worry about him," Temple said grimly. "He was amateur boxing champ at college for two years. Besides, he had his projector almost set for cosmic ray emission. If you—"

He broke off as the thunder of rockets suddenly died away from the stern. Then a shudder rippled through the craft as new explosions blasted more faintly

from the bow.

Lee clutched at his arm. She was frightened.

"Curt! What's happening?"

"We're getting close to Moon," he answered soberly. "It sounds as if we're turning a somersault in space. The rocket is built to land stern-first, so it has to be turned around for the blasts to work as brakes. I think those are steering jets we hear now, which means in a few minutes we'll be half-crushed by deceleration."

"But what can we do?"

"Not much," he said. "You stay here, tight against the cushion. I'm going forward and see what's what."

As he spoke, the thunder of rockets burst from the stern again and invisible force drove them back against the big pad. Smaller shocks from the sides indicated that the dropping craft was being jockeyed toward landing position. A sense of awe filled Temple at the incredible ingenuity that had created this controllable monster in so short a space of time.

Fighting the drag of deceleration, feeling the first faint pull of Lunar gravity, he fought his way along the dimly lighted corridor toward the bow. He could tell, now, that the rocket was dropping stern first at an acute angle. Eventually the ship would swing to full vertical for the final drop, and in those final minutes the check-blasts would be as terrible as the take-off. Unless he were braced and cushioned, he would be smashed to pulp against the metal bulkheads.

The corridor was narrow and low, lined with countless small sliding doors, and roofed with an odd tarry substance that glowed with faint radioactivity in the dim light. This was probably the same material that had coated the meteorites, a shield against cosmic rays.

Dragging himself forward by the hand-rail, Temple reached an open door at the corridor's end and peered into the small control room. His eyes widened in amazement.

ROCOSSEN was strapped in a great, webbed seat, thickly padded and suspended from heavy coil springs in front of the control panel. His slender hands rested on a small bank of levers, like the throttles on an air transport, with which he was delicately directing the steering and braking blasts. Temple watched tensely, noting which levers were moved, and listening to the location and intensity of the resulting blasts. Gradually the picture of the rocket's control was forming in his mind.

In front of the astrogator, a large television screen flashed a swelling image of the pitted Moon, while a smaller screen beside it showed the red-haloed globe of dwindling Earth. A lump rose into Temple's throat at the sight.

Rocossen jockeyed the steering blasts until the massive crater of Plato lay squarely under cross-hairs on the screen. Temple stared at the airless, alien world, seeing the nearby pits of Eudoxis and Cassini, the mighty Caucasus, Carpathian and Teneriffe ranges jutting like monstrous teeth around Mare Imbrium.

Southward, the peaks of the Dorfel and Leibnitz Mountains broke the horizon. How often he had studied the dead panorama through the telescope! But this was different. There were the weird colors in Plato's depths, colors that had mystified astronomers for years, and a queer diffusion of the sharp sunlight as though air were present.

Suddenly the thunder of stern tubes, and the terrible force deceleration awoke Temple to his own danger. He glanced around and saw the rear wall of the control room, padded and cushioned as the stern had been. Apparently this was extra safeguard in case of emergency. Temple slid to the cushion and clung there.

The stern tubes were firing steadily now, and the deceleration hammered his body against the bulkhead with crushing fury. Blood misted his vision, hammered in his ears and rose saltily in his throat. Lifting his diaphragm for each gasping

breath was a Titanic effort. Only constant frantic swallowing kept his eardrums intact against the crushing pressure.

On the vision screen the crater swelled to fill the plate, and a black dot in its center became a squat-domed hangar with gaping roof waiting to receive them.

Then, miraculously, the fall was easing the pressure and Temple could see and breathe again. The maw of the hangar filled the screen, and inside it, a tangle of framework showed faintly. The framework leaped upward and became a funneling arrangement of beams that guided the projectile to its cradle.

Metal grated suddenly against the hull. The rockets spurted and died, giving way to the sobbing wheeze of hydraulic cushions easing the great shell into its pit.

In the thundering silence that followed, Dr. Eno Rocossen snapped the last switch and leaned back. His fingers opened the catches of the great webbed safety belt that held him in the navigator's seat.

They had landed on the Moon!

XVI

WITH that knowledge flaming in his brain, Temple staggered erect, reeling dizzily, his body throbbing with dull pain. He wanted nothing so much as to lie down on the metal floor and close his eyes, but a numb desperation kept him erect.

Rocossen, clambering to the floor, saw him then and his expression whipped from incredulity to blazing triumph. He snatched at a paralysis projector sheathed beside the seat.

"I thought you were finished," he snarled, "but this is better. Now Monj himself can enjoy your conversion to our project. March back to the port, Temple!"

He centered the projector menacingly with one hand while the other reached toward the plunger that operated the lock pistons. His lips curled in a mocking smile.

Temple hesitated, swaying. There was an elusive thought scurrying through his numbed mind, something he ought to remember—something that might mean his salvation, and Lee's. He groped for it desperately as Rocossen's thumb tightened on the paralysis trigger.

Suddenly the elusive memory smashed into his brain with an impact that drove away the numbing clouds. He straightened, smiled grimly—and walked toward Rocossen.

"Go ahead and blast me, Rocky," he invited tightly. "But where will your little plaything get its power? Not from the free energy radiations outside, because your ship is insulated against those rays."

With a snarl of baffled fury, Rocossen hurled the useless projector at Temple's head and whirled to tug at the lock control. Dodging the missile, Temple lunged forward, dragging Rocossen's hands from the lever. The two men went down, squirming and fighting.

"Hold him, Curt!" Lee darted in, waving a silver liquor flask that was battered almost beyond recognition. "One good sock with this should take the fight out of him." She grinned at Temple's surprise.

"I peeked in one of those doors, and there was a Plague victim strapped in against the padded hammock and *this* smashed against the wall. It was all I could find for a club so I grabbed it."

"Wait!" Temple pinned Rocossen with his knees and stretched a hand. "Is there anything in it?"

"Sure." Lee sniffed the cap. "Whisky. But this is no time to think of that.

"Give!" Temple's eyes blazed. "Alcohol affects the brain, and it might make the job of controlling tough for an entity. And as I remember it, Rockey's system never could stand much liquor."

He forced gulps of the amber liquid between Rocossen's set teeth and forced him to swallow by pinching his nose.

The astronomer strangled, shrieked, and suddenly went limp.

Temple jerked down the battered remnants of the detector still strapped to his forehead. In the bent screen he saw the entity jerk free and dart erratically away down the corridor. Rocossen suddenly groaned and tried to sit up.

"Curtis!" he exclaimed. "Miss Mason! You've freed me at last from that terrible power! Oh, to think that I, a doctor of philosophy and fellow of the—"

"Forget it," Temple said gently, helping the shaken astronomer to his feet. "You had illustrious company in your shame. But right now we've got bigger worries. You've made this trip often. Can you remember what we'll be facing outside when that port is opened?"

Rocossen groaned and his face blanched.

"Slaves—hundreds of poor, helpless devils like myself! Huge, glowing caverns, horrible monsters from another world, and the feeling of thousands of malignant beings filling the air, intelligent, yet invisible."

"Nice picture of our future." Temple grimaced. He squared his shoulders. "Well?"

"Curtis!" Rocossen clutched his arm. "You're not going out there! Not planning to face *them*—"

TEMPLE'S face was cold. "We'll have to face them sooner or later, here or after they seize Earth. We can't run away now. Before we could get back home, persuade people we weren't crazy and organize an attack, they could overwhelm the country with the big rocket. They might shoot thousands of entity-laden rocks at Kansas, send hundreds of human slaves in the other ship, destroy this base so we couldn't ever land on the Moon again to fight them!"

"I see," Rocossen stiffened grimly. "We shall do what we can, as long as we can. Lead on, Professor Temple."

"Bravo!" Temple handed the nearly empty flask to Lee. "Pour it down, sweet —every last drop."

"Me?" She gaped at him. "Why should I?"

"Because," he explained patiently, "the first thing they'd do would be to yank off your silver cap and seize your brain again. I'm banking that as long as alcohol fumes are rising you'll both be given a wide berth by the entities."

As she coughed down the fiery liquor, Temple jerked the wood railing from the wall and broke off three sturdy clubs. Then he pulled the piston control lever to its farthest limit.

The pistons gurgled softly and fell into a steady, rhythmic chugging. The great round lock crept out of its seal to reveal a short section of tunnel leading off to a lighted area.

Then, as the gap widened, he saw that the tunnel was actually a telescoping metal tube that met the rocket hull in an air-tight seal, forming a passage through the roofless, airless hangar to the main depot. It was, he realized, an ingenious device for eliminating intricate airlocks or space suits.

Temple peered down the passageway. He could see no living beings at the far end, but the screen of his detector was afire with the glow of uncounted drifting entities, hovering, waiting. His nerves felt cold.

Rocossen suddenly slapped him on the back.

"That whisky was excellent stock, Curt, old boy! I feel exhilarated—definitely exhilarated. Ha!"

Lee Mason laughed, and a burst of crazy laughter welled up in Temple's own throat. Rocossen was getting more than protection from his enforced drinks. Fortunately there had not been enough left to affect Lee's cortex.

"Bring on your ol' en'ities," Rocossen hiccuped, shaking his club. "Le's go se ol' Monj himself, ol' boy, ol' boy."

"Monj?" Temple gaped at him. "Who is Monj?"

Rocossen leered owlishly.

"Monj? He'sh the big cheese. Mashter of the Moon. But I c'n lick him. C'mon!"

Before either Temple or Lee could

stop him, he bounded into the tunnel and swaggered toward the distant light.

TEMPLE groaned and leaped in pursuit, with Lee at his heels. Ahead, Rocossen reeled out of the tube into the brighter light and stopped short, the club dropping from his hands. Temple and Lee burst out beside him and skidded to a startled halt, gasping, stunned.

They were inside a low, sprawling, dome lined with the same obsidian-black radioactive substance that had coated the meteorites and shielded the rocket's interior. To their right, purring machinery bulked huge behind metal screens. To their left, a huge archway revealed a Cyclopean, glowing passage that slanted down out of sight into the very bowels of the Moon.

Overhead, glowing rods like fluorescent light tubes, supplemented the greenish radiance of the shimmering walls. Far to the side, Temple saw the outline of a heavy door with the bulbous shapes of six metallic space suits suspended from the curving wall beside it.

All this background Temple saw at a single sweeping glance before his stricken gaze riveted on the weird actors who occupied this nightmare stage. Ranged around half the wall before them stood row on row of human beings, incredibly stiff and motionless, staring at them with dead blank eyes.

Before this army of the living dead stood three men, the center one a tall, gaunt man whose brain bore the most gigantic entity Temple's detector had ever revealed. He did not need Rocossen's awed whisper to know that he was face to face with the leader of the entities—Monj, the Master of the Moon.

But what brought the startled breath to Temple's lips was the circle of monstrous shapes that came slithering out of the shadows from both sides to surround them. For a moment he was too stunned to breathe. Lee Mason's fingers tensed, biting into the corded muscles of his arm.

"The Vards!" Rocossen murmured, shrinking back. "The Vards!"

There were seven of the creatures, like seven grotesque sea monsters out of their native element. Leathery, bulbous bodies that were both head and trunk, sprouted ten sinuous, writhing tentacles. Four of the tentacles, thicker than the rest, terminated in round sucker-discs that gripped the floor as legs. The remaining six tentacles were spaced around the body as arms.

With an eerie, gliding shuffle, the seven creatures drew together, surrounding the three humans in a wide circle. Arm tentacles writhed out and gripped one another, forming a network of interlocking living bars around them.

Temple gasped aloud, not at the weird creatures or their action but at the definite impression of intelligence that lurked in their huge saucer eyes. Alien the creatures might be in form, but there was thinking, reasoning intelligence in their luminous eyes!

His guess was confirmed by the presence of a glowing entity on the back of each bulbous head-body. He felt certain the entities could not utilize hosts without the intelligence, since their power seemed to lie in intensifying knowledge already present in a controlled brain, rather than by implanting new knowledge.

The fact that the entities sought out trained scientific minds on Earth indicated their need for at least a foundation of established thought patterns. He thought it probable that the entities, by supplying their brain with a limitless flow of pure mind energy, could stimulate its activity to supernormal heights along already established channels!

The presence of the weird creatures cleared up another question in Temple's mind. It explained how vaporous beings, lacking physical bodies, could have constructed the crude stone "space ships" and hurled them at Earth.

Lee pressed close to him, shuddering.

"Curt, what are they? Do you suppose they're the native inhabitants of the Moon, enslaved by the entities?"

"I doubt it. These Vards, as Rocossen called them, don't appear to be physically adapted to Lunar extremes of heat and cold, and they're obviously oxygen-breathers. But we'll probably find out about that and a lot of other unpleasant things soon enough. Stick close to me every moment."

His detector screen showed the vast dome of the building packed with countless multitudes of the entities, hovering watchfully. Others were ranged along the wall while still others poured into the tube behind them, obviously to revive the new victims brought by the small rocket.

Temple groaned aloud. How could they ever hope to smash a menace whose vast forces were invisible, omnipotent and well-nigh unconquerable?

XVII

MOVING as if in response to a silent command, the circle of Vards suddenly came ahead, forcing their encircled captives closer to the figure of Monj and his companions. Rocossen shuddered and swung a white, strained face toward Lee and Temple.

"Oh, Lord!" he whispered tightly. "To think I trafficked with these monstrosities only a short time ago. I remembered all this vaguely, but they look hideously different, now that I'm back in my right mind."

The figure of Monj stirred.

"Silence," his voice thundered. "Slaves do not whisper in the presence of the Master."

Anger blazed in Temple's eyes. He took a quick step forward, gripping his makeshift club.

"Just a minute," he snarled. "We aren't your slaves and we don't intend to be. You made a pretty good start toward invading and ruling the world, but right now, mister, you're facing three people you can't invade and rule."

Monj stiffened, and the Vards shifted warily, staring. For an instant Temple sensed a network of flying thoughts weaving in the air about him. Then Monj spoke, his voice puzzled.

"Invade and rule your world? Why should we try to do that? We don't want your poor, sterile globe with its alien life-forms. What glory could we find in ruling races who, compared with our science, are little more than savages?"

It was Temple's turn to stare, open-mouthed.

"I don't believe you!" he snapped. "You certainly went through all the motions of invasion and our poor 'savage' races seem to have done fairly well in supplying you with brain-power. Personally, I think you're some feeble outcasts from some other world who hope to run a bluff and get yourselves set in a new, easy life where you can steal true ability and claim it for your own!"

He deliberately loaded his voice with sarcasm. Monj was already trembling with raging fury, and Temple was coolly fanning that rage. If he could goad Monj into blowing up completely, the entity might unintentionally reveal a clue to the mystery. Fantastic as it seemed, Temple actually believed that invasion and conquest was not the true purpose of the entities.

There was another crackling silence. Then the anger went out of Monj's face, replaced by calm deliberation. After a moment he nodded.

"Very well. You shall know the truth. Perhaps the reactions of your race to our problem may yield as an unexpected clue. Relax, and let your mind receive thought-pictures of the story that will be projected by our greater energy onto the curtains of your minds. Do not be afraid. You are quite safe from seizure until the story is told."

Then he began to speak softly and vibrantly while Temple's stunned mind carried him up among distant stars and showed him weird, incredible scenes with a vividness that touched every emotional chord in his being. He saw by the expressions on the faces of Lee and Rocossen that they, too, were sharing his visions.

"Our home lies eons away in space on Xacrn, ninth planet in the Solar system of the faint star you call Seventeen Leporis," Monj began, and Temple's mind flamed through the awful vastnesses of space to an alien, incredible world of indescribable life-forms and unnamable colors. "We are Xacrns, the ultimate evolutionary form of the highest life order in the cosmos. Once, millions of generations ago, we possessed physical body-forms infinitely more useful and adaptable than yours—"

TEMPLE was breathless as his thought-visions brought him pictures of monstrous Vards tilling alien soils, fabricating strange instruments and tools with their marvelously prehensile tentacle-tips, building and dwelling together in vast cities. Were the entities and the Vards divergent offspring of a common root?

"Inevitably," Monj went on, "there were some of us more interested in the development of the mind than of the body, more hungry for knowledge than for material possessions. It is always thus with every race, on every world. Even on your Earth, in your own country, you see each passing year widening the gap between the farmer and the pure scholar.

"With us, as the ages passed, our separate interests gradually evolved two separate races. The Vards remained essentially in their original form, content to blend craftsmanship and labor with thought. We who neglected our bodies to build our minds, found those unused body-forms wasting away, being discarded by the forward surge of inexorable evolution, until at last we reached a stage where our minds existed without any physical body whatever."

Awed, Temple watched the mighty pageant of evolution unfold on his mind-screen. He saw certain of the Vards withdraw to barren cells to concentrate on thought while their unused tentacles and finally their bulging bodies withered and died.

"Take heed, Earth people!" Monj thundered. "A million years hence, your evolution will have swept you on to the same ultimate state—and to the same inescapable doom. You know I am right. Already, in the past hundred years that are no more than a second in eternal time, you have seen your human bodies grow frailer while your minds sharpened and gained new strength. It will go on until you are like us."

The visions became nightmares, showing Temple the final dissolution of the Vard bodies, the growing hordes of bodiless, dissociated entities that replaced them. And always the scenes flashed back to those other Vards who toiled on without the all-consuming ambition, who prospered and were happy, content to let mind and body develop together.

With growing horror, Temple saw the logic of Monj's prophecy. Was this to be the future of the human race, to become darting clouds of pure energy doomed to an intangible eternity?

"But we were proud of our accomplishment," Monj continued. "We drove on and on until we could find no more problems to be solved, no more secrets to unlock in all the cosmos. When it became convenient for us to employ physical bodies to perform the tasks our super-minds conceived we made the common Vards our vehicles. Thus we had all the advantages of corporeal bodies with none of the discomforts or obligations. It was a most happy combination."

"I'll bet the Vards were overjoyed," Temple growled.

"They were favored," Monj said stiffly. "They gained all our vast knowledge without sacrificing their own bodies."

Temple's lips thinned as he saw a vision of the humble Vards, torn from home and homely occupations to toil in shops and laboratories, each driven to do his task by the glowing entity on its brain.

He saw them building space ships of

fantastic form that flashed among the stars and planets until, in all the galaxy, there were no riddles left unsolved. The immensity of their accomplishments left him weak, breathless and trembling.

"Too late, we learned of our doom." Monj's voice sank. "The doom of perfection! We had overlooked one thing. Evolution may be slowed or speeded or diverted into strange by-paths, as your Earth scientists have done with radiation bombardments to the generations of *Drosophila*—but it cannot be halted! Evolution must go inexorably on. We have evolved into an ultimate energy form—only to discover that it was not the ultimate, after all. Ahead lay another step—the mergence of our separate energies into the one great all-pervading universal energy. To us, that meant oblivion, the destruction of all our separate personalities. And what lay beyond that, we could not even guess. We only knew that in a few hundred generations, our race would cease to exist."

THE visions changed, filling Temple with a great sadness and a great pity. He saw Rocossen's lips droop, saw tears well in Lee's eyes as they shared the despair of a dying race.

"We saw our doom, but we refused to accept it. Somewhere in the Universe there must be salvation for our race, we felt sure. I was commissioned to find that unknown factor."

On the screen of his mind, Temple saw the great space ship, driven by entity-controlled Vards, flash out through the Universe. From planet to planet it went, searching, ever searching, reaching familiar systems, flashing past the Sun to curve toward Earth. He felt the terrible impact of the wandering meteor that smashed the controls, sent it crashing instead, on the dead Moon, in the heart of Plato Crater.

"For centuries we lived in the ruined ship," Monj went on, "While the Vards who survived the crash worked desperately to effect our rescue. Ships were constructed of the crude natural minerals of your Moon and hurled toward Earth bearing Xacrns in search of aid, but the centuries passed, and no aid came.

"Finally we concluded that some inimical radiation outside must be destroying them and proved its presence. Until then we, shielded by the natural material of our own ship, were unaware of its existence. Meanwhile, a new disaster faced us. Our Vards, being mortal, were growing old, dying, with none to take their places. We faced the eventuality of being stranded, helpless. With their last strength, the surviving Vards built eleven ships, insulated them with shells of our native metal and sent them out. This time the expedition reached its goal, constructed the crude repulsion ships and established contact. The rest you know."

The visions suddenly vanished from Temple's mind, leaving him awed.

"But what are you seeking?" he cried. "What discovery can save your dying race? Why aim all your stones at Kansas?"

"You have seen enough," Monj said coldly. "The rest will be answered when you have joined our project."

"We're not joining!" Temple roared, snapped back to reality by the words. "We're not substituting for your Vards."

Monj's face darkened. He gestured coldly, and the living barrier of Vards broke. Before Temple could move, coils of rubbery tentacles whipped around him, pinioning his arms. He saw that Lee and Rocossen were similarly held.

"Take those two into the depths." Monj indicated Lee and the astronomer. "Remove the silver caps and wait until the vapors have evaporated from their brains. Then seize them." He turned toward Temple and his eyes narrowed. "This one is to be prepared at once for the operation."

"Operation?" A cold chill touched Temple's nerves.

The figure that was Monj spread slender hands.

"This body and brain was the property of a skilled surgeon. That skill will serve us well in a few moments when a simple operation removes that silver plate from your head so that I myself may enter and take full possession of your splendid brain. Take them away!"

XVIII

AT the thought of losing the silver screen that had been his defense, Temple was stunned, frozen. It would be so simple to remove and, once it was gone, his brain would be completely unguarded. The thought of becoming a slave to the entities, of taking part in their still mysterious project against the human race, filled him with agony. The thought of Lee and Rocossen returned to that slavery was a knife-thrust in his heart.

"Summon me when Temple is ready for the operation," Monj instructed the Vards.

The largest of the grotesque Vards bobbed its hulking body in an obeisance. A triangular mouth opened below the saucer eyes and unbelievable, impossible sounds came forth.

"It shall be done," the Vard said, in perfect English.

Temple gasped in stunned amazement. He saw Lee blink dazedly. The idea of human speech issuing from those alien mouths was indescribably shocking.

The pressure of the clutching tentacles, moving them irresistibly toward the mouth of the sloping passageway, broke the paralysis that clutched Temple's mind. Desperation spurred him, whipping his mind to furious activity. His eyes fell on the outline of the distant closed door with the space suits hanging beside it.

Some instinctive blaze of revolt made him brace his feet against the forward pressure and fight to break the clutching grip of the tentacles. His muscles swelled, corded. and soon perspiration streamed down his face. It seemed blind, hopeless resistance, yet—

Abruptly, a gripping tentacle slipped under the bulging pressure, and a sucker disc broke loose with a sharp *pop*. It was mad, impossible, but he was matching his strength against that of the great decapods, and winning!

"Fight!" he panted to Lee and Rocossen. "Monj told us the Vards were old, almost too far gone to finish the last space ships. Fight them! Break their holds!"

He pressed out against their clutches until his eyes misted and blood roared in his ears. Dimly he knew that somewhere near the voice of Monj was roaring insanely and that the human slaves were rushing to aid the Vards. With superhuman, desperate strength he tore away the last clinging coil and sent the aged creatures reeling back.

Rocossen and Lee, following his example, were fighting desperately against their own captors. Temple rushed in, clawing and tearing at the encircling arms. Suddenly the three from Earth were free, facing the massed fury of the onrushing human slaves.

"Over here!" Temple bellowed and raced for the door, dragging Lee and Rocossen with him. "Our only hope is to get outside where they can't follow us. I'll fight back the mob while you two get into suits. Then you hold them while I dress."

"No!" Rocossen yelled. "Grab suits, and run—out! There's some thin air outside—not too cold."

Hope blazed in Temple's heart. Pickering and many other astronomers believed there was still some atmosphere on the Moon, pools of it trapped in the depths of giant craters like Plato.

If there was enough to temper the intense cold, they could get beyond reach of the entities and pause long enough to don space suits. Without shielded armor, the entities would instantly perish under the direct cosmic radiations.

An idea flamed in Temple's brain. In mid-stride he swerved and caught the limp tentacles of the Vard leader who had slumped to the floor, exhausted. Without pausing he raced on, dragging

the helpless creature after him, inches beyond the clutching hands of their pursuers.

Ahead, Rocossen was tearing at the door catch as Lee jerked down the bulky suits. Still dragging his feebly resisting captive, Temple snatched a suit with one hand and pounded through after them, into a narrow air-lock.

Rocossen slammed the inner door in the face of their pursuers, holding it against their weight while Lee tugged open the outer door. A blast of intense cold struck them like a tangible wall, driving knives of agony through their chests.

NOT daring to speak, holding their breaths against the rarified air, they raced across brittle lava to a jumbled heap of gray rock. High overhead, sunlight threw a knife-edged lance of almost unbearable illumination against the crater wall, but down here in the shadows it was almost totally dark. Only the tenuous wisps of dying atmosphere held a faint, gray radiance that made the darkness a lighter dusk.

Still holding their breaths, they clambered into the bulky unfamiliar suits, clamping bulbous helmets into place, opening valves that flooded the suits with invigorating air. At their feet, the captive Vard stirred feebly.

Lee pressed her helmet against Temple's.

"Curt, that poor creature will die without protection. That's cruel!"

"I don't think so," Temple answered as Rocossen bent forward to share the conversation. "There weren't any suits for them, yet they must have worked outside a great deal. I wanted to get him out here where the radiations would destroy his entity. If he suffers, of course we'll send him back."

The Vard rose shakily and laid a tentacle tip against Temple's helmet.

"Thank you for my freedom," it said. "It is the first I have ever experienced. It is a strange, lonely feeling but I like it. Do not worry about me. My immense lungs find plenty of oxygen in this thin air and I do not even feel what you call cold. It is only outside the depths of this crater, where there is no air at all, that I would perish."

A gusty sigh drifted faintly to Temple's ears from the direction of Rocossen's helmet.

"Amazing, Temple! Incredible. I commend you on your ingenuity. You have rescued us from the enemy, and we are safe."

"Safe," Temple said grimly, "except for the minor matter of food and water and oxygen renewal that will probably become a little bit annoying in time."

"What do we do now, Curt?" Lee asked.

"To be absolutely truthful, darned if I know. The idea of losing my screen and seeing us all made into entity slaves just didn't appeal, so I organized a revolt. Beyond that, I haven't had time to think. But we'd better be good and quick. These suits don't seem any too well insulated and I can't find any trace of a heating unit. That cold is penetrating."

"Y-y-your t-telling m-me," Lee interrupted. "My t-teeth are ch-chattering already."

"In spite of the air," Rocossen remarked, "it must be well over a hundred degrees below zero down here. We shall freeze."

"Cheer up." Temple grinned wryly, pointing upward. "That sun line is practically racing down the crater wall toward us. When it reaches here, the temperature will go up to better than two hundred above. If there was only some way—" he whirled toward the Vard. "You, whatever your name is, do you know of any way we might stay alive out here?"

"My name is Decex Vard," the creature answered solemnly, "which means I am the member of the Vard race whose identification number is ten thousand. We are all designated by number. I know of no haven for you unless we might find a cave whose rocks both store and keep

out the coming heat. There are a few such in the crater wall. I shall seek one."

He shuffled off, probing the eerie writhing tentacles into masses of debris. Temple was staring around him fascinated and awed by the weird nightmare landscape of the great crater, when Lee's helmet clicked against his.

"Whatever we do we'd better do fast, Curt. About a dozen men in space suits just came tumbling out of the lock. They're carrying funny-looking guns and I think in about a minute we'll be able to keep warm just by running."

TEMPLE whirled and groaned. Faint light from the open port gleamed on silvery space suits massed in front of the dome. They must be special suits, insulated against cosmic rays to protect the entities from destruction. Ordinarily, he guessed, the entities did not go out, but merely implanted lasting thought patterns on the minds of those slaves who were sent beyond the lock.

Decex Vard came lumbering back, frantically waving a tangle of arms toward the dome.

"They come!" he shrilled. "Slaves of your race guided by the strongest mind-forces and armed with the terrible weapon of atomic blast. You must flee! There is no deep cave near."

"Where can we go?" Rocossen cried. "In a few minutes this whole crater will be in direct sunlight. There's enough air down here to diffuse the light, too, so the shadows of rocks won't be deep enough to hide us completely."

"Up the crater wall is our only chance," Temple barked. "We can keep hidden as long as we stay beyond the line of sunlight. Come on!"

They raced across the crater floor in grotesque leaps, utilizing the lighter Lunar gravitation to increase the speed of their flight. The weaker muscles of the aged Vard proved unequal to their terrestrial strength, and they slowed somewhat to drag him between them.

"I don't see any pursuit yet," Temple said finally. "So they evidently didn't see us. Let's dig into that mountain of broken rock over there against the crater wall and rest a bit."

They flung themselves down in the blackness, panting and trembling from exertion. Temple's eyes were sultry.

"We shouldn't get out of breath so fast," he choked. "I'm afraid this means our oxygen supply is low. Those tanks seemed terribly small."

Decex Vard waved his tentacles around them for contact.

"The suits are equipped for only an hour at lowest metabolism," he stated. "That is so there could be no danger of a slave breaking the mind-shackles and attempting flight."

"What?" Temple cried. "Can such a thing happen? Do any of them ever throw off their entity's control?"

"Occasionally. Only humans do it, and apparently only those who fought against seizure. If the entity catches a mind completely unnawares and unsuspecting, its domination is complete."

"Whew!" Lee whistled. "Will I give them a battle next time!"

"Decex Vard," Temple asked, "what are the entities looking for? Why are they so anxious to seize control of Earth? I don't see how conquering the human race will save them from the ultimate evolution that they fear so greatly."

"Oh, but my masters are not trying to conquer Earth," the Vard answered quickly. "Except for the failure of our poor bodies, they would never have touched Earth at all. But in order to return to Xacrn it was necessary to secure metals and other vital products not found on the moon, as well as skilled hands to fabricate those products into the necessary vessel. To do all that swiftly and accurately required the work of hundreds. So those Xacrns who set out for Earth were instructed to concentrate on opening regular communication between Earth and Moon. With that done, and all Xacrns equipped with skilled bodies, they could move Earth, build the great ship and go home."

"You mean," Lee asked, incredulous, "that all this—this reign of terror was for no other purpose than to give you manpower and metal so you could go home?"

"Of course. While my masters had not solved the secret of perpetuation of the race, time was growing short and they desired to end their days on their native planet."

"For Pete's sake!" Temple barked. "The dopes! Why didn't they come down and ask for what they wanted?"

XIX

GREAT saucer eyes stared blankly at Temple. The Vard did not seem to comprehend.

"You mean," he asked, "you mean that in your civilization individuals *ask* for what they desire instead of merely taking it?" His tentacles waved dazedly. "Truly your race is a strange one."

"Curtis," Rocossen exclaimed, "can you imagine that! But it stands to reason that a race concentrating on super-evolution would understand no law but the evolutionary code of might—survival of the fittest and destruction to the weak."

Temple was shaking his head in dazed incredulity.

"What a colossal misunderstanding!" he whispered. "A mighty cosmic joke on everybody. If we'd known that, maybe we could have reached an understanding instead of fighting. Maybe we can still bring our alien ideas into harmony. I feel sorry for the poor fools, now that I know their history and aims. And, bad as they've acted, do you realize that they themselves haven't taken a single human life that we know of?"

"I was under the impression," Rocossen said drily, "that they tried hard enough in our case. I dislike giving them all the credit for our prowess."

"But by their standards," Temple insisted, frowning, "any resistance to us was in the nature of self-defense. No, Rocky, I've suddenly quit hating the entities, and begun wishing I could help them. I believe all this can be mediated!"

Lee came tumbling down from taking a quick peep over the parapet of rock that hid them. Behind the faceplate of her helmet, her hair was a golden cloud over her eyes.

"You can start mediating any time, Curt," she declared. "Six of those pathetic creatures are headed this way, following our tracks in the lava dust, and from the way they're holding their guns, they mean business!"

Temple sprang up, his face paling.

"Start climbing higher," he barked. "We have the advantage of rocks that won't show tracks from here up. Come on, Decex. We'll haul you up as high as your lungs can stand the rarefied air. And don't worry. We won't let you be taken back to slavery as long as one of us is left to fight."

Decex Vard's tentacles quivered frantically, whipped out and drew the helmets against his leathery bulk.

"But I want to go back," he protested. "Already I feel lost without the great Vrif who has been a part of my life for these many centuries. I only wanted to see what freedom was like, as a brief adventure. You are kind, but none of us want to lose our masters. We suffer and tire, but we would not change."

Lee Mason collapsed on a rock, gasping.

"Well, I'll—be—darned!" she whispered in most unladylike amazement.

TEMPLE'S jaw dropped, and his eyes bulged. "What?" he roared at the quivering Vard. "We risk our idiotic necks to rescue you, and you don't want to be rescued?"

He got a swift impression that if the writhing creature had possessed a head, it would now be hanging that head in embarrassment. Somehow, deprived of its entity-master, the Vard was singularly childish for all its amazing knowledge and abilities.

"Forgive me, most kind of friends.

Our worlds are so far apart that even our affections are alien. But what I said is true. Those others are our people, our guides and leaders, and we would be savages without them. They make us work until we fall from exhaustion, and they drive us into pain and suffering, not because they hate us but because their energy-minds feel no such thing as emotion. Love, hate, fear, pain—the entities, as you call them, recognize those states only as words. We understand that and are not resentful. We do our best, accept the kindness of our masters and find life good. You have meant great kindness to me and mine and that intent is appreciated. But I must return. Thank you, and farewell."

Before they could move, he was up, loping down the slope like a great, many-legged dog, to face the oncoming men.

"Poor, simple-minded dupe," Lee whispered. "He would actually be lonesome without pain and oppression."

"That poor, simple-minded dupe," Temple interrupted harshly, "has just showed those hunters down there exactly where we're hiding by barging out that way. Get down. They're raising those odd guns to their shoulders."

An instant later there was a blinding, soundless flash above their heads and a huge pinnacle of rock burst into drifting dust. Another eerie burst of light shattered a boulder to their right and fragments rattled sharply against their suits.

"Whew, what energy!" Temple exploded. "We've got to get out of here in a hurry before those blasts eat away every rock in this heap—and us with them!"

They scrambled back an instant before the very rock on which they had been standing was shattered by the weird, soundless flash of energy.

"We don't dare try to climb," Temple said as they fled from the bombardment. "They're near enough now to see us against the cliff, since our suits reflect star-shine. Stick behind these boulders and maybe we can break back into the plain far enough away to get clear."

They raced over scattered debris from the towering wall overhead, painfully conscious of the dwindling oxygen supply that would soon make all their efforts futile. Recossen staggered close to touch Temple's helmet as they ran.

"What—did you—say," he gasped, "about — sparing — human lives — in their activities?"

Temple swore at him and pounded on, head down, flaming agony biting into his lungs with every breath.

When they reached the end of their rocky screen, they halted.

"Which way now, Curt? We can't last much longer. And here comes the sunlight line to burn us up in another five or ten minutes!"

"To the dome!" snapped Temple. "Our only hope is the rocket hangar behind. There may be a store of oxygen there, or some way of getting into one of the rockets."

THEY bounded out onto the inky floor of the crater and plowed to a halt. Ahead, something was moving through the darkness, an occasional faint glint of reflected starlight revealing its presence.

"One of the hunters," Temple whispered, squinting. "But I can only see one person, and he seems to have his back to us. Come on—let's slip closer and try to get that gun away and pin him down. He may be carrying extra oxygen tanks!"

They stole forward, scarcely breathing, and neared the dim figure.

It was one man, carrying one of the rifles that fired the devastating atomic blasts. He was studying the plains for signs of his quarry.

The three pounced together, metal clanged against metal, and the enemy was down, writhing helplessly inside his clumsy armor. Temple hurled the atomic rifle out of sight among the overhanging rocks. He could never use a deadly weapon as long as he knew that his adversaries were helpless, entity-driven dupes who might yet be restored to normal.

There were two spare oxygen tanks strapped to the slave's belt.

"You and Rocky take these," Temple ordered brusquely. "I'll combine the oxygen that's left in your two tanks and have nearly as much. We may be able to grab another hunter soon."

Despite their protestations, he exchanged the fresh oxygen tanks for the depleted ones, which he slung on his own belt, and motioned them on. They left the entity slave struggling to his feet.

"He can't do much without a weapon," Temple told the others, "and the chances are he'll head back for more oxygen. His first tank must be low, too. Now we're good for another hour, and a lot can happen in an hour, We might even figure out a way to save the Xacrn race and exchange that knowledge for our freedom."

"You can't stop evolution!" Rocossen shouted.

"I'm not too sure," Temple denied, shaking his head. "Besides it's the only possible way I can see to stop all the horrors like the Crimson Plague that will go on as long as the entities need bodies."

He plodded on, absorbed in thought.

Without any warning, the lava dust in front of his feet exploded in a burst of livid flame, and a mighty, invisible force hurled him off his feet. He landed on his back, bruised and breathless from contact with the hard shell of the suit. Rocossen and Lee were stumbling toward him with other bursts of atomic fury pursuing them.

TEMPLE got to his feet groggily and lurched into a run, waving to them to follow an erratic course that would make aiming difficult. The gunner was hidden somewhere in the darkness and, with no telltale muzzle flash to betray his presence, there was no way of knowing for sure which way led to safety.

The three raced on, weaving and dodging, and for a moment there were no more explosions. Temple began to breathe again as the menace seemed to have passed.

Then abruptly a new burst came almost underfoot, and another in mid-air between their tumbling bodies. Temple realized, then, that they must have been running straight at the unseen marksman.

Scrambling up, they pounded away to the side, changed directions and hammered on while the deadly bursts fell away behind them and finally quit completely. They slowed to a staggering walk and drew together.

"That was close!" Lee caught a hard breath.

"Too close," Rocossen agreed. "Altogether—too—close."

His bulky figure suddenly reeled and went down heavily, to lie motionless in the lava dust. With a pang in his heart, Temple dropped down beside the astronomer and saw the slender lips moving behind the faceplate. He touched his helmet to the other's.

"Carry on, you two," Rocossen whispered, coughing. "Don't fuss over me until you get caught."

"Rocky! What is it?" Temple bent closer and saw the long ragged gash through the metal breast plate of Rocossen's suit. "Are you badly hurt?"

"Not hurt—at all." Rocossen grinned. "Just—out of breath. I cut off—my oxygen. You take it. There's no—way to patch—a suit out here. Good luck."

"Lee!" Temple whirled toward her. "Get going! Head back for the crater wall, stay out of the sunlight when it gets there and watch for help. Don't try to get into the hangar now."

"Curt, what do you mean? What are you going to do?"

"I'm taking Rocky into the dome," Temple snapped. "He can't lie there and strangle, and there's no way to patch his suit. With his oxygen turned on full, he can get enough to breathe until we make the dome. It's the only way. I'm still safe from seizure by the entities, so there's a fighting chance. Hurry!"

Quickly Temple gathered the protesting astronomer in his arms and lurched to his feet.

"Go back to that rock heap where they nearly caught us before and stay close," he told Lee hurriedly. "It's the safest spot, now that they've driven us away from it once. Stay there and don't move except to avoid being seen or caught by patrolling hunters."

"But Curt, what can I do to help?"

"I'll show the entities that we aren't antagonistic to their purpose and be back as fast as I can with a rescue party. My silver screen will keep me free and safe until I've explained ways in which we can help them and after that everything will be all right. Just wait for me. You've got oxygen enough for an hour to an hour and a half, and the cold can't get you as long as you move around. Good luck, darling."

He touched her helmet briefly with his own, smiled into her anxious eyes and was gone, staggering off into the darkness with his burden.

XX

DESPITE the fact that Lunar gravitation gave his burden a total weight of less than fifty pounds, Temple's arms soon ached torturously. Still he pounded on, lungs straining for every gulp of air, sweat pouring down his face, legs pistoning numbly on by the sheer driving effort of desperation.

He had to get Rocossen into the dome before the last trickle of compressed oxygen had fled through that gaping rent in his suit. Temple could feel the hiss of escaping air against the chest wall of his own suit, and the dwindling sound of it filled him with despair.

He plodded doggedly on, losing all sense of space and time, guided by the stark blaze of advancing sunlight along the crater wall to his right. In his arms, the slender Rocossen had given up his futile, feeble efforts to protest and lay quietly, conserving air.

Where, a few short minutes before, it had seemed that everywhere they turned they ran into searching entity slaves, intent on their capture, Temple now began to feel that he had plodded on for hours in an absolutely uninhabited land. He would have welcomed capture to be relieved of his burden, to see stronger hands bear Rocossen to safety. He trudged on.

His reeling brain turned inevitably to the entities and their fantastic doom. A race of super-intelligence, hurtling inexorably along the path of evolution to oblivion. A civilization wiped out, not by its shortcomings and evils, by its very perfection.

Why did his mind persist in gnawing at their problem? How could he hope to find a key to their salvation where their super-minds had sought it for centuries without success? Compared to their knowledge and their science, the greatest accomplishments of Earth were no more than the cloudy myths of a savage tribe.

Temple tried to dismiss the thoughts, but they beat back into his mind with relentless purpose. Think, Temple! Study the problem from new angles! There is a salvation for the Xacrns, and the key to it lies within your grasp. You had the answer in your hands once within the past hour and let it slip away unrecognized. Bring it back! Think, man! *Think!*

Temple groaned aloud. If he could show the entities how to save themselves from extinction, how to return to Xacrn with immortality for their race, his own personal problems and those of Earth would be solved automatically.

How long would it take the entities to build their escape ship and leave Earth forever? A month? A year?

This would be no blast-driven rocket capable of lumbering the few scant miles from Earth to Moon and back, but some new marvel beyond human comprehensibility. It would be an impossible, unthinkable mechanism capable of flashing across inter-galactic space where the very milestones were hundreds, thousands, millions of light-years apart.

Such a craft might take years in the building, ample time for resentful hu-

mans and arrogant entities to lock in horrible and profitless warfare. Temple shuddered at the vision. Such an eventuality could be halted only if he found the elusive answer that hammered at his brain.

Without any warning at all, he found himself plodding automatically into the midst of space-suited figures who closed in, covering him and his burden with deadly atomic rifles. He stared at them dully for a moment, then realization of what those figures meant brought a sigh of thankfulness to his lips.

DROPPING to his knees, Temple gestured frantically at the gaping rent in Rocossen's suit and ahead toward the still invisible dome where life-giving air waited. His urgent message got across to them. Two bent down, staring, then seized Rocossen between them and raced off into the darkness.

The rest closed in, prodded Temple to his reeling, rubbery legs and drove him ahead. He went willingly, his mind absorbed in his coming meeting with Monj.

This time things would be different. When the entities saw that there was hope of realizing their apparently impossible goal, there would be cooperation and united effort. For all their alien form, they were thinking, reasoning beings, fighting only for the perpetuation of their race.

Success was near. Temple had a clear, positive impression that he was on the verge of discovering or isolating the key. As soon as a rescue crew had brought Lee in from the airless wastes, he would have Monj repeat the entire story of Xacrn history, exactly as it had been told before. Somewhere, during the past hours, Temple had seen or heard something that was a vital clue. It must of necessity be hidden in the Xacrn's own past history.

The huge dome loomed out of the darkness. Temple let himself be rushed through the air-lock and into the great interior. The first sight he saw was Rocossen sitting up unaided beside the wrecked space suit, looking pale and shaken but unharmed.

Then Temple saw the waiting assembly, with Monj and his lieutenants at the front, Vards ranged watchfully at each side, and rows of human slaves behind. As Temple's captors shoved him into the room, Monj and his companions hastened closer. Temple grinned at him through the faceplate as he waited for the helmet to be unscrewed and removed.

One of Temple's captors stood back of him while two others turned and raised the bulbous helmet. Fresh, sweet air struck his face and he breathed deeply.

He was still drawing in the first long breath when the entity slave behind him took a step forward and slammed a padded club against the side of his head with stunning force. Dimly, from a queer high vantage point, he seemed to see himself plunging forward to his face, seemed to hear Monj say coldly,

"Excellent, Div. We can take no chances on his getting away from us again. Carry him into the chamber at once. I'll operate and remove the silver screen immediately, while he is unconscious from the blow."

Temple tried to cry out, to tell Monj that he had the key to their salvation. He tried to tell him that Lee was out there in the crater, waiting, her air supply dwindling by the minute until soon there would not even be enough left to carry her to the dome to surrender.

He was still trying to choke the words out of his frozen throat when his senses fled and darkness closed in. . .

WITH her heart pounding uncontrolably and cold fingers brushing her nerves, Lee Mason hurried away from her farewell to Temple, back toward the sheltering debris below the crater wall. Alone for the first time, she began to realize just how far away she was from the familiar landscape of Earth, how helpless against the unknown menace of this alien nightmare land.

On Earth she had thought nothing of

braving a hundred deaths in scientific exploration among jagged mountain peaks, deep in subterranean caverns, up among the clouds in planes and balloons. Ordinarily Lee Mason was cold, calm, nerveless.

But tonight a nameless terror filled the weird darkness and drenched her with cold perspiration. It was not a fear of the hunters nor of any unknown life form that might conceivably inhabit the eternal shadows. It was simply the reaction of overtaxed nerves to the added menace of the unknown dark.

In the grip of that unreasoning panic, Lee's feet forced her from a walk to a trot that swiftly grew into a run, then into wild flight. She bounded frantically toward the looming barrier of the thousand-foot crater wall, seeking some cranny where she could squeeze in and let the luxury of solid substance against her back and sides calm the trembling of her nerves. Behind her the sharp, incredible terminator boundary between light and darkness raced across the giant bowl in pursuit.

Suddenly a low rim of rock loomed in her path. Without slowing Lee flexed her firm muscles and leaped over the barrier. It was a tremendous leap that swept her beyond the hurdle a good sixty feet. She came down, muscles set for the impact of landing—and there was none!

She came down into the shadow of the ground, and the shadow had no substance. Before she could think, she was falling endlessly down into the dead crust of the Moon, down a slanting shaft of absolute darkness, lined with jagged rocks that plucked metallically at her bulging armor without slowing her breathless fall.

It seemed that she had fallen for hours into the bowels of the Moon and would go on falling for more hours. Then suddenly she slammed down among the upflung teeth of massive rocks at the bottom of the shaft and her head struck the faceplate of her helmet with a crushing force that brought the blackness through into her brain.

SHE came back to consciousness with a sharp wonder that she had survived the fall and was still alive. Her body was one mass of bruised agony from banging against the poorly padded interior of the suit but as nearly as she could tell the bruises were only superficial.

The faceplate of her helmet was miraculously intact, and the suit retained its air supply. Plainly she owed her life to the lesser Lunar gravity that had given her plunging body only one-sixth its normal Earth weight.

Intense, absolute darkness, unrelieved by any shade or glow, surrounded her and completely concealed everything around her. There was no way of discovering the nature of the shaft or her chances of climbing back to the surface, for she carried no flashlight. There were no matches in her purse, and anyway, that was inside the suit, strapped to her belt.

The fall had jarred the panic from her nerves and she managed a shaky laugh as she sat up and started to climb to her feet. Abruptly the laugh died on her lips. From the waist down her suit was rigidly immovable. She lay back and tugged and kicked until her legs ached and perspiration rolled into her eyes, but the metal cylinders that encased her legs were rock-solid.

Genuinely alarmed now, Lee sat up again and fumbled with her steel-gauntleted hands for the cause of the phenomenon. Her hands encountered a massive block of rough stone which, apparently dislodged by her stumbling body, lay across her knees.

Try as she would, she could not budge it, nor could she stretch far enough to reach its boundaries. For all she could tell, it might be the whole crater wall pinning her down.

SHE shuddered at the realization that only the metal legs of the suit had kept her from being crushed to pulp under that massive rock.

Lee lay back, fighting down a fresh panic, trying to reason sanely. She could

not summon enough strength or gain sufficient leverage to free her suit. That much was certain. Nor could she hope that Temple, searching for her, would ever stumble onto this particular shaft and discover her whereabouts at the bottom.

She had no light to flash upward, no gun to shoot to attract attention, and in that rarefied air she could shout until her lungs burst without ever a whisper drifting to the surface, an incalculable distance above. Realizing these things, she became suddenly aware of a dull ache in her chest and an abnormal hammering in her ears. That could mean only one thing. Her air was running low, thinning out to extinction.

Lee lay back against the cold rock and blew away a drop of perspiration that tickled the end of her nose.

"Well, Lee Mason," she whispered, "it looks like the beginning of a very nasty end." She shivered. "But what a cold, lonely place to die in!"

XXI

LATE in the afternoon, a group of shaken men gathered in the gloom of the smaller rocket hangar in the Arizona camp and stared wearily at one another. Farge, looking like the survivor of some gigantic explosion with his black eyes, battered face, and tattered clothing, hugged the flat case of a projector and stared gloomily up toward the open roof.

Mullane and Lansdon and Jacobs and the other scientists, bearing lesser bruises, but dazed and shaken from their recent experience, faced him anxiously.

The camp guards, restored to normal but still sullen and frightened, huddled close by.

"Damn!" Farge cried suddenly in hoarse fury. "Curt and Lee are up there, facing God knows what horrors, and all we can do is stand around like a bunch of bumps on a log. We can't lift a finger to help them, don't even know that they're still alive! For all we know, they may have been overcome and forced to join that fiendish crowd by this time."

"Take it easy," Mullane said placatingly. "We know how you feel, Allen. After all, none of us can forget that we were forced to take a hand in getting them up there." He drew a shaking hand across his ashen face. "Lord! I thought we were doomed to that slavery for all eternity. Nothing in the world ever felt so good as the agony of that beam you finally managed to turn on us."

Farge straightened and managed a wan smile.

"Forget it. I'm sorry I get the jitters, but it's this feeling of utter helplessness now, after having had such a big hand in fighting the menace before."

He had told them of the weary weeks of research and experiment he and Temple had put in, and which at last had led to perfection of the weapon and this invasion of the camp. For a time after the grim battle, when the rocket had blasted off with Lee and Temple and Rocossen, and when Farge had finally battled his way clear long enough to adjust his projector and destroy the remaining entities, the scientists had been too weary and shaken to do more than talk.

Later, carrying Lansdon's bulky detector instrument, they had combed the whole camp area, destroying every floating entity that blazed on the screen.

"You think we'd better stay in camp here and keep quiet a while longer?" Jacobs, the lanky chemist, asked.

FARGE waved an expressive hand. "What else can we do? This place is our only thread of contact with Moon, now. If a rocket returns, it's got to come here, and we've got to be here to meet it. Besides, if I stick my nose outside, about five hundred FBI men are going to land on it with hobnailed shoes. If they guessed I was in here, we'd have an invasion on our hands right now."

"Personally," Lansdon growled, "I'd give anything to put a thousand miles between me and this place, but I see your point. And if we went out now and tried to tell the truth, we'd probably land in a

first-class booby hatch. The very least we'd get would be to be locked up for a few weeks while a bunch of fat-headed politicians investigated our stories."

"How can we ever face people, anyhow," Mullane demanded, "after the ghastly things those entities made us do? Hey, listen to that! Thunder! Must be going to storm."

Farge cocked his head, listening. Suddenly his eyes widened. He leaped toward the door. "Thunder, hell!" he bawled over his shoulder. "That's a rocket coming back! Maybe it's Curt with news of victory."

"And maybe it's those fiends back for more bodies," Mullane snarled. "But how can they travel at any old time of the day or night like this? I always thought a rocket had to be timed exactly to the split second in order to intersect the orbit of the body it's aimed at."

"Not this one!" Davoe cried, running beside him. "I made the trip with Eno once and saw how it worked. They've got direct-vision screens of some kind that show the Moon. All they have to do is blast off any time, turn until Moon shows on the screen, then head for it by dead reckoning, aiming the ship like a gun. Of course they have to keep swinging to compensate for Moon's motion, like guiding a telescope with a manually-operated azimuth mounting."

Out in the bright sunlight they stopped, staring up at the vivid blue of the sky, trying to see the source of the steadily deepening thunder. Tense expectancy gripped them all. What would the rocket bring?

"There it is!" Farge cried suddenly, pointing.

They all saw it then, a pinpoint of black that swelled with incredible speed, painting a widening smoke path across the blue screen of the heavens as it screamed down the flat curve of its trajectory.

"Don't we have to do something to help it land?" Farge demanded suddenly.

"Lord, yes!" Lansdon snapped his fingers. "There's machinery that moves the cradle up to meet it, then lowers it to the pit on hydraulic cushions. I think I can remember how to operate it. My mind is hazy on most of what I did during that time, but that seems clear enough. Come on."

Moments later they stood in the hangar, screened from the searing blasts of the jets, as the smaller rocket dropped expertly into its waiting cradle and was lowered to floor level.

"Oh—oh!" Mullane muttered. "I don't like that. It's handled too expertly for an amateur. That must mean—"

HE LEFT the rest unsaid, for a grim threat was hanging over them. They hid behind pillars near the foot of the gangplank, listening tensely to the sob of pumps unlocking the sealed port. Jacobs held the detector in readiness. Farge's hands were clammy as they gripped the projector, ready to blast if enemies appeared.

The great lockplate dropped at last, and the slender figure of Eno Rocossen appeared at the head of the gangplank, staring warily around. Even before they saw the violet blaze on the detector screen it was apparent that his brain was in the grip of an entity. The stiff coldness of his face and the flatness of his eyes gave ample visual evidence of that.

"Controlled!" Jacobs barked. "That means Curt and Lee are dead or their slaves. Blast him!"

Rocossen saw them at the same instant. His hand came around from behind him, leveling a blue beam projector.

Farge's lips thinned and a hot flame burst in his eyes. He pressed the trigger of his own weapon. Terrible, unseen radiations flashed out soundlessly and the entity on Rocossen's brain evaporated.

Mullane and Lansdon sprang forward to catch the astronomer as he toppled, but before they could reach him, he swayed back and plunged headlong off the narrow gangplank into the rocket pit below.

His plunging body struck the blackened concrete with a crunching thud and lay still.

"My God! Rocky!"

They clambered down the iron ladder and hauled him tenderly to the surface.

He was conscious, his face gray with pain. One arm dangled brokenly and a gash on his head oozed crimson.

"I'm okay," he whispered as they bent over him. "Got to get back to Moon. They've got Curt. Operating now—taking his silver screen. Hurry! Lee lost in—crater. Curt knows how—to stop entities. Rescue him!"

He closed his eyes.

"What are you going to do?" Davoe cried.

"I'm going after him!" Farge gritted, clenching his fists.

"Heavens, man!" Lansdon objected. "You don't know how to run the rocket and Eno may not recover in time to do it. You'd never be able to—"

"I'll never learn, sitting in an armchair," Farge snapped. "I can push and pull levers until we either take off or blow up. I'll figure the rest out after that. Anybody going along?"

XXII

KNOWING nothing of the tremendous risks that those men of Earth were taking to speed to her rescue, Lee Mason realized that, after her first dull resignation to an inexorable doom, her mind was beginning to function again. It was better to die fighting than to lie back and wait for the end to come. She struggled upright, vitalized by a return of her old fighting spirit.

It was only her suit that was trapped. If she could slip out of that, she would be free. But without the protection of the suit and its dwindling air supply, she would die quickly from the intense cold, and the rarefied air.

Or would she? A new thought smashed into her mind. Thin air lingered in the great bowl of Plato, though it was not sufficient to support human life.

But if the air was at least tenuous at the crater's surface, it should be still more tangible in the bottom of this deep pit. While it might not be enough, it could be no less than her suit would contain in a few more minutes. And a quick finish was preferable to a slow, lingering one.

With steady fingers, she began to twist the bulbous helmet, withdrawing it from the air-seal at the throat. Suddenly it came loose and a rush of bitter cold stung her face. She drew a deep, racking breath that seemed to have no soothing effect on the shriek of her oxygen-starved cells.

She breathed more rapidly, gulping in sharp, bursting breaths of the thin atmosphere, and suddenly it seemed that the dizziness was lifting from her brain. It was true! The air was dangerously thin, but with care it might maintain her for a time.

Relieved, she unsnapped the seals and drew herself gingerly out of the trapped armor until she stood erect and unprotected in the pitchy darkness. The cold lashed at her like a thousand flaming knives, and the darkness beat down upon her in a stifling cloud, but she was free and still alive. And cold as it was, the layers of rock above her seemed to cut off the worst of it. They must gather and retain some heat from the terrible periods of sunshine.

She was free—but for what purpose? Even if she could clamber up the shaft to the surface, the rarer air and greater cold would be fatal. Still she had to do something, had to keep moving, to prevent her body from freezing and her brain from succumbing to the numbing horror of her predicament. With outstretched hands, she began to stumble forward, groping her way over the jagged rock floor.

Presently she came to a hard, cold vertical wall, and felt her way along its rough surface. Suddenly the wall vanished from before her hands and she stumbled forward onto a down-slanting floor that seemed to indicate a cavern

or tunnel that branched off from the pit.

Here the cold was less intense, and Lee's sobbing breaths were more satisfying, as though the air were heavier. Pressing the side wall for support and guidance, she stumbled ahead. The floor leveled off, after a time, and grew smoother so that she could make better progress.

She lost all track of time and distance until it seemed that her whole life had been spent in plunging endlessly into eternal night. Vaguely she knew that she was somewhere deep in the uninhabited, lifeless bowels of the dead Moon, drawing ever further from the slender passage to the surface where there were human beings and light and air. But the full meaning of that had long since drifted from her reeling mind. She staggered on.

She saw the light ahead a long time before its meaning penetrated her brain. At first it was only the faintest imaginable lightening of the intense gloom. Then it became a glow and, at last, a circle of eerie radiance.

With a hoarse cry, Lee stumbled forward and out into a low corridor whose metallic walls were emitting a steady phosphorescent radiance that was somehow vaguely familiar.

But whatever it was, that lighted tunnel spelled the presence of life and the nearness of rescue and warmth and air. She ran down the tunnel at full speed, her clicking heels raising clattering echoes that pursued her flitting figure, cackling eerily at her hope.

An eternity later, the corridor turned and opened out into a larger glowing chamber. From a long way off, Lee saw that chamber filled with familiar objects —chairs, a table, and incongruously, a white porcelain hospital cot. A human figure moved slowly among these objects, a figure that was achingly familiar.

Lee raced into the chamber with a great sob of thankfulness on her lips.

"Curt! Oh, Curt! I don't know how you got here or how I got here, but here we are!"

Temple turned and stared at her, his jaw dropping. There was something oddly different about his face, a coldness and stiffness. His eyes, too, were queer —flat and dull. She stopped suddenly and shrank back.

"Curt, what — what's wrong with you?"

He smiled stiffly and held out his hand.

"Nothing's wrong with me, Lee. Not a thing. I was only terribly surprised to see you here. Come here, Lee. Come to me."

Hesitantly she moved forward. Like a striking snake, his hand shot out and closed on her wrist, and a grin of triumph curved his lips. It was only then that she noticed for the first time that the back of his scalp had been shaved clean of hair and that a small, stained pad of dressing was taped in the center of this space. . . .

TEMPLE had wondered many times just what it would feel like to be the slave of one of the glowing brain parasites. As he opened his eyes and sat up stiffly on the hospital cot in the great glowing chamber, he knew, and he tasted the horror of that knowledge.

He, Curtis Temple, still existed as an ego, but he had the eerie sensation of smallness, of being compressed to a microscopic speck, his whole personality compacted into a single atom at the top of his aching head.

Below him stretched his own body. He could think about that body, see what it was doing, hate it and fear it and plan movements for it to make. But he could not control or affect it in any way.

He wanted to lie on the cot and ease his weariness, and his mind, set the proper nerve-mechanisms into motion to produce that desired effect. But his tired body continued to rise, got up off the cot and moved about the room with steady steps. He realized, then, that he was but a helpless, voiceless spectator, relegated to the farthest recesses of his own

mind by the omnipotent force of the usurping entity.

And he could no more interfere with or affect the activities of that conqueror force than he could jar Earth from its appointed orbit by kicking at a clod in the field!

"I am a slave!" he thought wildly. "The entities took my silver screen and seized my brain."

He heard no sound but instantly an exultant answer graved itself across the plastic thought-screen of his mind.

"That is right. You are now my body, my vehicle, and a far more suitable one to my purposes than the slave I occupied before. Now Monj, the Ancient One, is properly housed."

A swift, blazing terror flashed through the part of Temple's mind that was still his own. He had held the lives and futures of hundreds of innocent persons in his hands and now that trust had been violated.

But there was something else, some great discovery he had been on the verge of making that would completely change everything. It was something about the entities, about a doom they faced.

Suddenly, frantically, he shut his mind to the thoughts. He had almost had it and he knew that if the solution reached the surface of his mind now, the terrible power of Monj would discover and seize it.

And if that happened Temple would have lost all hope of bargaining for freedom.

"What was that?" The question flashed sharply across his mind. "You had a thought, then—something about solving the problems of the Xacrn's future. Tell me what it was. Tell me, Temple, or I shall make your helpless body inflict tortures."

Desperately Temple fought to submerge the thought, to hide it from the deadly probing tentacles of the ruling force. For a moment his body reeled and staggered from the fury of the terrible psychic struggle in his brain.

Decex Vard had said that sometimes an entity's hold could be broken—but that was not reckoning with the greater strength of the leader, Monj. Slowly, inexorably, the secret was being probed out of Temple's brain, stolen despite his every effort. . . .

THE struggle ended abruptly. There was an unbelievable interruption. Temple heard the glad accents of Lee Mason's voice and turned to face her. His mind uttered a wild cry of happiness and raced across to take her in his arms.

But his body, in the hands of Monj, stood motionless, stretching a traitorous hand, gloating as the victim stepped hesitantly forward to be seized. Temple's consciousness writhed and struggled and fought to break the deadly hold, to cry out a warning, but he was powerless.

He could only face the inevitable conquest, helpless, as the brain force of Monj swept out through the air, summoning a free entity to hasten and seize Lee's brain.

In a moment there would be no more free minds here, no more resistance to the entities—only helpless slaves, forced to complete obedience of every command.

His hand lashed out and seized Lee's wrists, drawing her forward despite her sudden realization and desperate struggle to break free. His mind cried out in agony while his lips laughed in triumph.

Then something happened. It was as though the contact of his hand with Lee's sent a new stream of energy through his nerve paths to his mind. Coupled with his own desperation, it exploded a new surge of strength.

He braced his mind against the solid rock of her nearness and fought the grasp of Monj, the conqueror. With every ounce of his will and determination he sought to drive the entity out.

Snarling, shrieking, threatening in soundless flashes of terrible thought, Monj resisted. Temple and Lee stood close together, their bodies frozen together in rigidity as the terrible struggle

went on in Temple's brain. Lee, sensing what was happening, poured the strength of his own confidence into him and intensified his efforts.

Slowly they won. Slowly the entity retreated, losing grip after grip, against the advancing force of Temple's will. There was pain, terrible blinding agony, and the sickening sensation of brain cells being torn from their resting places by clutching tentacles.

Suddenly it was over. With a last flare of resistance, Monj gave way and fled. Temple's body was weak, trembling, bathed in cold perspiration. But his mind was his own again, and wonderfully clear.

"You've won," Lee exulted, clinging to him. "You've driven the entity away."

"But only for the moment," Temple said, holding her. "We've got to do something fast. Neither of us have any protection now. I wouldn't have the strength to go through that struggle a second time and there'll be another entity along in a moment to seize your mind."

"Quick!" Lee cried, tugging at his arm. "I know a way we can be safe for a little while, long enough to rest and make plans. Hurry!"

She dragged him back along the way she had just come, urging him to greater speed as they raced down the glowing passage.

"The radioactive lining ends back here a short distance," she explained breathlessly. "Beyond that there's enough air to keep us alive, and it isn't too desperately cold. If that stuff really is their insulation against cosmic rays, then the entities won't dare follow us beyond the shielded part of the tunnel."

They burst past the last radiance and halted, dragging the thin air into starved lungs, in the darkness beyond.

"Shouldn't we go further back?" Lee asked, trembling.

"I think this is far enough. They'd hardly dare risk even brief exposure to radiation so destructive and so unpredictable. Let's sit down a moment while I try to think what we can do. Tell me how you happened to show up so unexpectedly, sweet."

When she had finished telling him, he nodded soberly.

"Fate was certainly on your side, Lee. This seems to be an artificial passage. Probably at some time in the past the Vards tried mining operations as far out as the crater wall. It was sheer luck that you dropped into their shaft."

"Those poor Vards!" Lee whispered. "I still feel a little ill when I think of how placidly they submit to that cruel slavery simply because they understand that the entities can't feel."

"Lee!" The walls of the tunnel echoed Temple's thunderous shout as he sprang to his feet. "I've got it! I've got the clue I missed before, the clue that kept nagging at me all the time! Lee, I know now how the Xacrns can be saved from their next step in evolution.—Quick! Start yelling for Monj. He's probably gone back to his first body, and I've got to talk to him. I believe I can bargain us all out of this mess!"

XXIII

THEIR combined shouts echoed down the corridor, finally to be echoed by the tramp of approaching feet. Monj and his henchmen appeared, flanked by Vards. They hesitated suspiciously, some distance back from the end of the glowing shield.

"Will you two come back and submit now?" Monj demanded harshly. "Or do you prefer to stay where you are until cold and hunger have given you that 'freedom' you defend so strongly?"

"We'll come back," Temple answered grimly, "on our own terms. Monj, I know how to save your race from doom! It's the simplest possible solution, but one your science wouldn't discover in a billion eons, because it requires certain properties you Xacrns don't possess. Yet your planet is rich in them, only waiting for you to help yourself and find salvation."

"I don't believe it," Monj snapped. "It's a trick to gain your freedom." But he said it hesitantly, and there was doubt showing on his face.

"It's no trick," Temple answered. "You know it, too, because you caught a flash of it in my mind and nearly stole it from me then. You know I'm telling the truth. If your race had only known or realized that our civilization is based on a different principle than the one of grab-and-conquer—whether some of us act like it or not—you could have had the secret long ago. If you had asked, the whole world would have pitched in willingly to help supply what you needed, construct your ship, and see you off for home with a new lease on life. Human beings are built that way. They'll never be slaves, never learn the docile fatalism of your native Vards. That's why you could bring the whole Xacrn race here and conquer Earth without ever actually conquering the human race! You've got to understand that, Monj, in order to understand your own salvation, in order properly to use the tools I can place in your hands."

"What is the secret?" Monj demanded tensely, while his weird companions swayed forward in breathless eagerness. "How can the Xacrn race be prevented from evolving into oblivion?"

"Uh-uh-uh!" Temple relaxed, grinning and waving a reproving finger. "No tickee, no washee, boy. We don't give, we trade. When we landed here, both Miss Mason and Rocossen had silver caps. The first thing you'll have to do is get those caps and toss them to us. We want to come out and talk this over with you but not until we're safe against seizure."

THERE was a long, nerve-racking silence. Then a Vard suddenly turned and shuffled back along the corridor. Temple's breath went out gustily.

"The tide turns," he whispered and squeezed Lee's hand.

"Do you really know the answer?" she demanded.

"I really know it, sweet. The answer to everything."

In a moment the Vard returned, and the two caps were tossed to them. They fitted them on with sighs of relief.

"By the way," Temple demanded. "What happened to Rocossen?"

"He was sent back to Earth in the smaller rocket as soon as he recovered. Thanks to your attack, the base we had established there seems too dangerous to maintain until we see what the reaction of your public may be. Rocossen was equipped with a weapon and instructed to bring back our most valuable instruments and plans. If necessary, we can remain here for a time until affairs are smoothed out. He will return soon."

"You hope," Temple breathed.

He and Lee moved warily from their point of safety, but neither the Vards nor the human slaves made any move to attack. In silence they moved back to the great domed hall with its rows of motionless humans. The detector was gone now, but Temple could still see, in his mind's eye, the endless swarms of hovering free entities, a potential menace to all humanity.

"The secret!" Monj cried hoarsely. "Give us the secret, Temple. Quickly!"

"First, how long will it take you to build your ship and take off for Xacrn?"

"With the secret in our possession"—Monj's voice rang with vibrant hope—"no more than a week. The larger rocket was built to form the hull of the new ship. It needs only the replacement of the crude repulsion power by our space-warp mechanism to make the trip."

"I don't understand it." Temple shook his head. "Your world lies infinite light-years away in space. Even traveling at the speed of light, which we believe is impossible, you would never reach home before millions upon millions of years had elapsed."

"Of course not," Monj said impatiently. "Xacrn is impossibly distant in space and time but not in space-time. With our science, we can so warp the tapestry of space-time that our worlds

are no more than a leap apart. We shall be home within days, even though as you say, it is impossible for material substance to exceed the speed of light." His hands extended pleadingly. "But the secret, man! The secret!"

"Will you agree to release immediately every human slave, withdraw all your fellow Xacrns from wherever they have been scattered over Earth and restore all Plague victims to normal life?"

"We agree. After all, we have nothing to gain by doing otherwise. We sought only to accomplish our ends in a way that seemed necessary."

"Curt," Lee whispered, "how can you be sure they'll keep any promises they make? After all, we've had experience with them."

"I think they'll keep their word. There's nothing inherently bad or dishonest in them. They simply know nothing but the achievement of a goal by any means within their power. With that goal reached, their own super-mentality should show them the futility of doing anything but going home."

HE FACED the thronged slaves and invisible entities, and his voice rang.

"Then I give you the salvation of your race! Decex Vard, come up here by me."

When the great Vard had lumbered to his side, he threw an arm across the leathery body.

"When you get home, do honor to this Vard, for it was from him I got the clue to your future salvation. You Xacrns began as normal body-mind combinations-like this Vard but by forced evolution, a part of your race discarded physical bodies and became only super-minds. Your doom lies in the fact that you can't stop evolution from carrying your super-minds on into eternal energy. Your salvation lies in halting evolution, retrogressing to a point below the danger line."

Monj's voice was harsh with disappointment. "Is that all you offer? We have recognized that obvious fact and tried for uncounted ages to accomplish the impossible. It cannot be done. Our minds will not retrogress under any stimulus."

"Oh, but they will," Temple retorted, smiling. "You started existence as a complex bundle of thoughts and emotions. Your ideas and visions and dreams were all inextricably wrapped up in your emotions. You started all this evolution in the first place under the driving stimulus of emotions—love and greed and ambition. Then, as you went up the path, you discarded those emotional fibers from your minds at the same time, or even before, you discarded physical bodies. You don't know what feelings are today. You can't love or pity or admire. You aren't even actually afraid of your own doom. You simply see it as an undesirable end to mental activity, the only environment you know.

"Monj, the key to your salvation lies in recapturing the lost emotions. You seize bodies, Vard and human, and control them to your wills, but you have never once reached down and actually shared the emotions of that slave. You have never felt tired when he did, sick when he did. You have never known a surge of happiness when something pleased him, or a pang of sorrow when he suffered."

"Certainly not," Monj interrupted stiffly. "We are above those baser impulses."

"That is your answer!" Temple's voice rang triumphantly "Of course emotions are crude compared to mental perfection. But you could touch the emotional certers of those captive minds and feel with them if you desired, couldn't you?"

"Of course, but—"

"Then the moment you do, the moment you project baser impulses of raw emotion into your mental plane, you begin to retrogress, don't you? Yet you won't actually lose. You'll gain. You'll merge closer and closer until you and your Vards are again one body-mind and—"

"It is the key, the answer!" Monj

shouted suddenly, his face alight. "Retrogression without loss. No Vard will ever slip over the margin into infinite energy. We shall become Vards again, but wiser, more capable Vards."

"And the poor Vards will no longer suffer from their slavery," Lee cried, her eyes shining. "Curt, it means a new order of life for them! They never wanted to lose their masters because the masters were part of them. Now, blended as you suggest, they'll all know happiness. Curt, it's wonderful!"

THEY stood in smiling silence for a time, knowing without being able to actually see, the ripple of excited thought-currents flashing among the massed entities. Suddenly Temple frowned.

"Hey! I'm a dope. I forgot to add the demand that we all be transported back to Earth again. And if they leave the small rocket behind, our science can use that as the basis for starting interplanetary exploration."

"You shall be returned to your homes," Monj interrupted. "Every human, safe and unharmed. And the rocket, with its equipment, is yours as well. We shall—"

He broke off, reeling back as the dome suddenly reverberated to a resounding crash that rocked the walls. There were lighter crashes, a dull thud and then silence.

"What the hell!" Temple exclaimed.

Suddenly the mouth of the tube leading out into the rocket hangar erupted figures, grotesque nightmarish forms that staggered and stumbled out into the room.

Temple gaped, then roared with uncontrollable laughter.

The ragged, tattered invaders were his friends. Allen Farge, bruised and nearly unclothed, ran in the lead with a battered silver loving cup tied to his head and a shotgun against his hip.

Behind him reeled Mullane, his brain shielded by a shapeless mass of hammered metal from which protruded the unmistakable tines of a silver fork and part of the bowl of a spoon. Next, bruised and blackened, was Jacobs with a jingling mat of silver coins bouncing against his head and a gigantic Stillson wrench in his hand.

The last man to stagger in was Rocossen, one arm in a crude sling and a blood-stained bandage surmounting his drawn face. But he was still able to crinkle his eyes in a grin at the sight of Temple and Lee.

"We're here," Farge croaked, waving the shotgun. "Rocky blasted off in the rocket, then passed out. We steered it by guess and by gosh, and we got lost in space and we finally landed fifty feet away from the landing cradle we were trying to hit but, by jumping catfish, we landed it, and we're here! Bring on your entities!"

THE great rocket drummed steadily on through space, the green globe of the Moon dwindling in its smaller vision screen as the red-haloed ball of Earth swelled in the larger. The fury of acceleration was past, and passengers could relax in weightless ease and talk of what had happened.

Farge twisted in the control seat to grin back at Temple and Lee Mason, floating close together.

"You got a long way from your first path, Curt. As I remember it, you told me once you started out to discover why the gods hated Kansas and threw so many stones at it. I still don't get the answer to that. The stones were space ships, fired from that pit you showed me by some kind of radiant energy we know nothing about, but why did they all hit Kansas? It's a nice state, I grant you that, but why make it a target for a stone-fight?"

"I took the time to get my first question answered," Temple said, and smiled back. "And it's such a silly, simple answer that I actually felt disappointed. The 'gun' that fired those entity-laden rocks at Earth was set at an angle that would bring its projectiles into the path of Earth's orbit. They used, as you say,

a form of propellant energy we can't comprehend—but it took the full blaze of sunlight to set off that energy. The point where their launching gun was built lay on the floor of Plato, where the sun line reaches only when the Moon is in a certain definite part of its orbit. It just happened that when the sunlight fell so they could fire the gun, Kansas happened to lie on that part of the projectile's flight at that particular juncture of time and space."

"I'll be damned!" Farge ejaculated. "It's an anticlimax, that's what it is."

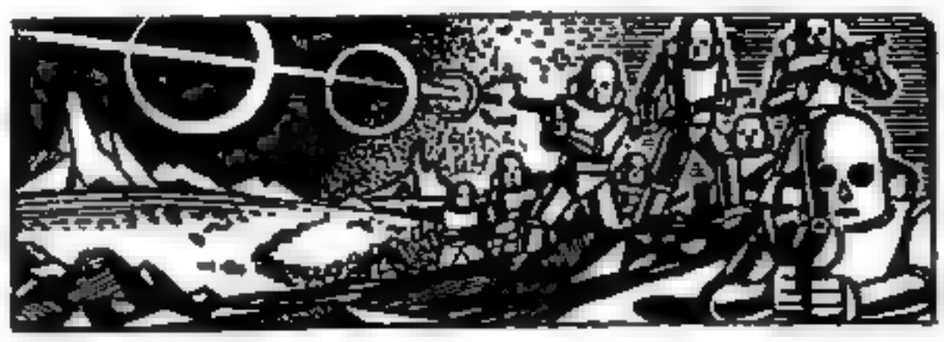
"Naturally, we've been bombarded by other natural stony meteorites from the beginning of Time," Temple said. "I imagine we'll find their fall uniform enough to satisfy the laws of chance. It was only the additional bombardment of Kansas that threw us off. But that's over now, thank heaven."

LEE SHUDDERED for a moment in his arms, and her eyes closed.

They were entering the first reaches of Earth's atmosphere now, and suddenly the screen in front of Farge showed a whipping streak of fire that flashed briefly and was gone.

A meteorite, perhaps no more than a tiny grain of cosmic dust, had flamed and died in its path from the changeless stars.

Farge saw it and recognized it, but remembering all that had gone before, he decided not to say anything about the meteor.



Next Issue's Science Fiction Headliners!

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A YANK AT VALHALLA

An American Visits the Abode of the Old Norse Gods in a Striking Novel by EDMOND HAMILTON

THE ETERNAL NOW

A Novelet of Frozen Time by MURRAY LEINSTER

THE MERMAN

An Uproarious Satire by L. SPRAGUE de CAMP

THE CASE OF JACK FREYSLING

The Saga of a Man Who Couldn't Die by THOMAS L. McCLARY

•

PLUS OTHER BRILLIANT STORIES IN THE JANUARY

FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

Watch for It!

There was a barked command behind him: "Attention!"

The Moebius Room

By ROBERT DONALD LOCKE

THE prisoner awoke beneath a glaring white bulb. He was immediately relieved to discover he was alone. The room, simply furnished and minus doors or windows, had blue walls that were bare except for a photograph—in medaled uniform—of the country's leader. For furniture, there was the army cot on which the prisoner lay, a lavatory, and a writing desk with chair in the center.

Sitting up, the prisoner examined his clothing. At some time his captors had stripped him of his dingy blue serge

It was more than a vicious circle—it was a vicious square

business suit and provided him with gray denim and felt sandals. A search through his pockets produced cigarettes, a lighter and a stubby yellow pencil.

His chest began to ache and he stood up to exercise. The air, fresh and fairly cool, filled his lungs. He wondered if he had been drugged yet and recalled with a shudder what he had heard about the *pharmacoepia of interrogation.* After the sweat came, he buried his face in the lavatory's nozzle spray.

Revived, the man studied his prison further. In one corner a trapdoor opened through the ceiling. He walked over and looked up; but, he could see nothing.

Shrugging, he sat down at the writing desk and laid a sheet of paper before him. Taking out the yellow pencil, he tried to review the day's events. What had happened? Where was he? Before his eyes there flowed a series of esoteric symbols, born from the nervous scribblings of his hand—but they were not recognizable in full.

He had been a mathematician, then.

But of what nationality? He found he had no recollection of his capture, or how he had been brought to this room. He was not even able to visualize his captors' appearance. In that case, narcotics had been used on him; possibly, several. *Lethene,* to destroy the details of his imprisonment; and probably *racefolia,* to injure his will to resist.

Then, his eye happened to meet the photograph of the nation's leader. A memory was rewakened that racked his body with shudders. He trembled in ague. There would be an interrogation. He ceased writing, aware now there would be no further clues buried in the engrams of his fingers. . . .

A CLANGING metallic sound behind him startled his nerves at that moment, so the prisoner's body froze in fear. As the hackles rose, he knew instantly that his control of cortical-thalamic responses had been severely damaged. His animal-like reaction to the unknown noise told him he could no longer rely upon his mind to ignore any pain reported by his nerve ends. Interrogation, if it came, would now be an ordeal out of the Middle Ages. Summoning all the willpower that remained in his spent nervous system, the prisoner forced his head to turn: he saw that the room was unchanged. Still empty.

No, not quite so empty! An aluminum ladder had been lowered from the trapdoor.

An invitation to leave? Or, to join his captors? His occidental mind, fashioned by centuries of Aristotelian-framed thinking, could not penetrate the oriental subtlety in offering either choice. He struggled with the instinct to remain where he was; in the end, it was the monotony of his present windowless confinement that led him to seek escape from its oppression.

The prisoner grasped the ladder's rung at the level of his eyes and commenced to climb. His weight tired his arm muscles. Just as his head thrust through the roof opening, he experienced momentary vertigo. The pit of his stomach was gripped by nausea. Mounting higher, he now saw that he was in a room similar to the one he had just left.

He continued on the ladder, until he was fully in the room. As he stepped off the top rung, a movement of shadow above him caught his eyes. Glancing towards the ceiling, he saw a man's sandaled foot disappear through a second trapdoor. Some person had just left the cell into which he had risen.

The new room was furnished identically to the former one. On the wall above the coat hung another photograph of the leader. A sheet of paper lay on the writing desk, possibly a message from the individual who had just departed. He walked over, inspected it; suddenly, his brain reeled. The writing was his own—the mathematical symbols more familiar now, though still unclear. He had escaped to nowhere. These were his original quarters!

All semblance of neuron control vanished. His heartbeat triphammered like a hot Geiger counter. Assailed by extreme panic for the first time since he awoke, he only knew he had to get away from these four deadly walls. He rushed to the aluminum ladder, scurried farther up the rungs. Again, vertigo smothered him.

He saw that he had thrust his head and shoulders into still another identical room. Just above him on a ladder, three or four feet past reach, stood the trunk and legs of a man of his own thin build. He raised his knee and the figure above him did likewise.

Now the prisoner wanted to scream as claustrophobia dug deadly fingers into his skin. He raised himself entirely into the room, the figure above him disappearing. He rushed to the table, took out a cigarette, broke it in half and laid it there; then, he scrambled to the metal ladder and climbed as speedily as his nervous condition permitted.

The past events were repeated. He found himself in a prison exactly like his last. Only now the broken cigarette relieved the scheme.

Still unconvinced, he climbed and climbed again, moving through a Jack and the Beanstalk nightmare. Each time, he re-entered the cell he had just left. Finally, sheer exhaustion halted him.

He sat down at the desk, commenced to write:

"I, a prisoner of unknown forces, do hereby make this plea for mercy and relief from unnatural confinement. If I am already under sentence, I demand it be carried out with full regard for the humanity of the prisoner. I have committed no crime other than to work for the good of mankind. . . ."

HE HAD intended to say more, but he was interrupted by a barked command behind him: *"Attention!"*

The prisoner dropped his pencil, stood up and turned around. He saw a tall blond man in a dark green military uniform of a nationality he did not recognize. By his bearing, close-cropped hair and corded shoulder insignia, the newcomer appeared to be an officer.

"You are Prisoner M, on the records," the blond man said. "You've had time to look your cell over?"

"Yes."

"Then, you've discovered there is no possibility of escape."

"What do you intend to do with me?" M asked.

"You are to be interrogated shortly," the officer answered. "You were arrested yesterday in the forbidden area past the Pae-Khoi Mountains. Our police took you to Kara, where you were transferred to this prison on Nova Zembla."

The lethene effect seemed to be wearing off. Now, M recalled that perilous threading of the barbed-wire after he'd rowed the skiff across the Yara river. Under the very nose of needle-gun forts, he'd made his way past six deadly hummocks to meet his contact near the largest cracking plant. There, huddled with the dissident scientist who dared to trade secrets of the Pan-Eurasian Combine for money and a promise of security when democracy triumphed, he had memorized formula after formula that would be invaluable to Washington.

Washington! Another chord sounded. He remembered talking to a grey-haired man in an H-bomb shelter on the Potomac months previous—perhaps it had been years previous. Yet the name eluded him, and with it his own name. Yet, that man had been his chief, he felt, for he recalled well the details of his assignment and the grey-haired man had said, "You will be the third we've sent in. The fuel for the warheads is guarded as closely as their leader's life —or as—well we've heard rumors of even stranger weapons."

Then the image faded in M's mind, leaving him only the remembrance of whistles blowing as he stumbled through the marshy tundra and the sudden appearance of a hundred angry, shouting uniformed figures.

"As a spy, you will be treated as a spy," the officer was now saying. He reached inside his blouse, brought out a small vial of tablets which he handed the prisoner. "This will be your ration for the day. The tablets contain a full complement of calories and vitamins."

M stood up, but even his full height did not reach as high as the officer's chin. He said, "What are you? Are you human?"

The officer smiled indulgently. "That's for you to ponder." His handsome face tightened. "There, take your pills. We can't wait all day for you."

The uniformed man strolled about the room. He studied the document on which the prisoner had been working, stroked his clean-shaven chin and crumpled the paper, stowing it in a pocket.

"You won't need this," he said.

The prisoner felt hope slide from his grasp. He looked at the vial of pills in his hand, feeling stupid and lethargic. So this was to be the condemned man's meal—or his glass of hemlock. He extracted two tablets and swallowed them, washing them down with a glass of water from the lavatory.

He looked around and saw that the officer had somehow disappeared while he was engaged. He puzzled over the mystery for awhile, then sat down on the edge of his cot to wait. The chemical action of the tablets swelled in his stomach and he felt comfortable, the brief hunger for food eased.

The next two hours passed slowly. The aluminum ladder still remained suspended from the trapdoor in the ceiling, but M made no further effort to use it. He felt no desire for the further agony of climbing endlessly, particularly since he anticipated greater trials in the interrogation that was to come.

MORE and more isolated segments from his past bubbled up in his memory. For almost a moment, he had his name. That he was a mathematician he was certain. He recalled the symbols he had first written upon awakening and now they seemed to spell a message for him. He gritted his teeth in an effort at recall . . they were . . . they were equations *for simple two-dimensional manifolds.* The term came readily to his tongue, but as yet it still lacked meaning. And now names came in a flood: Riemann, Moebius, Klein.

He heard the sound of boots scraping against metal. Uniformed legs appeared at the ceiling and descended the ladder. It was the same officer returning, although he had changed to an immaculate white dress uniform with interwoven gold shoulder loops.

There had to be an explanation how the other was able to enter and leave at will, but M's fogged brain was unable to grasp it.

The officer said: "Arise."

M stood up; he felt his tongue grow thick in his mouth. "What am I accused of?"

"You were found inside the lines," the officer said, with a slight trace of ennui. "That alone warrants your execution."

"But, there are so many different forbidden areas these days," M protested. "How was I to know?"

"That doesn't matter. You must be interrogated because of what you have done."

"This wouldn't happen in my country," said M.

"So much the worse for your kind of politics. Here, we are more civilized. The state must protect itself against the arrogance and arbitrariness of the individual. The individual does not matter"

"Then, tell me at least what crime I have committed."

"It is we who define the nature of crime," the officer said, growing impatient with his prisoner. "As you must certainly know, no type of individual activity can be tolerated in the closed state."

He raised a white-gloved hand in the direction of the leader's portrait. "We are all units in his organization. We exist only at his pleasure. You people

of the backward nations are somehow stupidly unable to understand that. We accept it."

The officer reached inside his blouse and brought out a leather apron which contained a variety of sharp tools in individual pockets. He tied the apron around his waist, then hooked a portable battery to his belt. His face was impassive as his agile fingers withdrew two of the tools, long delicate scalpels, from the left flap.

"I start at the right of your body and work gradually to the center," he explained. "Beautiful tools, aren't they?"

"You?" said the prisoner, his horror augmented. "What is your meaning?"

"Isn't it clear? I am also to be the interrogator. It seems I'm always being assigned to it. Oh, well, I hope you will be reasonable."

"For the love of God!" cried M.

"You forget you have crossed the border. I see that you don't intend to be reasonable. Screaming for mercy will do you no good. There is no escape. Don't you know you're in a Moebius room, prisoner?"

"A Moebius—?"

"Of the highest order. Are you a scientist?"

"Of sorts," said the prisoner, relieved at any opportunity to delay the proposed interrogation.

HIS interrogator looked smug—satisfied. "Then, you know how a Moebius sheet, a rectangular strip of paper whose ends are joined after an 180-degree twist, forms a unilateral surface. Our topological technicians have succeeded in applying the mathematics of analysis situs to the construction of unilateral solids. This room, for example, has null connectivity to the outside universe so long as it remains in its present state of distortion. In other words, it has no outside surface. Every surface is an inside surface. No matter how often you try to leave this room, you only re-enter it."

The officer sighed: "You see, it is very much like your western ideological conception of hell. We meant it to be that way. It is well known that in hell, there is no exit."

"Abandon ye all hope who—" the prisoner started to quote.

"Precisely," said the officer. "You see now, you should never have crossed the Kara. You should never have been interested in our fuel plants. Yet, you are fortunate. There are worse interrogators. I fancy I'm quite gentle. But, you are delaying me. I must get on."

M eyed the two instruments in the officer's hands with intense terror. The tiny elaborately designed barbs along the blades of the scalpels were too obviously intended for—

"You will help yourself by talking early," the officer warned sharply. "We want to know your accomplices, your codes. Remember, there is a limit to the skill with which these instruments may be employed—or doesn't the thought of mutilation frighten you?"

"You're going to use these on me?"

"But, of course."

"Here? Alone? Suppose I resist?"

The officer frowned: "You're not supposed to resist. According to our laws, we have every right to interrogate you. Are you insane? How is it that you, an individual, presume to question this right. How dare you rebel against it?"

Spitting out angry words, the officer pressed forward with the tool braced in his right and supported by the might of his shoulder. M withstood it for several seconds; then, a hideous scream burst from his tendon-tightened throat. Although nothing bound his body to the spot, he was paralyzed where he stood.

Suddenly a drop of blood spurted out, spattering just above the knee on the white cloth of the officer's trouser leg. The interrogator noticed and stopped his work to swear abusively.

"You clumsy hemophilic fool," he said. "So this is the kind of peasant they give me to question. Oh, you soft helpless

animal. You scum, you."

He produced a handkerchief and wiped the spot away, but a pink stain remained on the cloth.

"Now, remove your shirt," he said. "We will work on nerves of the pectoral muscles."

"What?" begged M.

"I said, remove your shirt!"

M felt a great tremor seize him; suddenly, his muscles were free. He leaped away from his tormentor and looked about for escape. With shock, he realized he had forgotten the absence of doors and windows. He rushed to the ladder and mounted the rungs.

When his head emerged above the trapdoor's level, the same interrogator waited for him in the room above. The man had not left his chair.

"You might as well co-operate," he said.

The prisoner was goaded to fury by the intolerable quality of his situation. He dropped back down the ladder and rushed at his persecutor. The officer gave away to alarm for the first time. He backed off in sudden confusion and cried: "You fool! You stubborn fool!" His arms were held up to ward off the rebellious attack.

BUT the very speed of the prisoner's forward movement enabled him to bowl the officer off his feet. As the interrogator tumbled backwards, the twin scalpels fell from his fingers. M landed on top of him and his right hand searched along the floor until it contacted an instrument. When his hand grasped the cold metal, he felt a wave of revulsion that sickened his entire body. He lifted the tool high and plunged it into the officer's chest, ripping through the cloth and penetrating flesh. A mottled stain appeared and spread on the white blouse as saliva simultaneously spurted from the interrogator's whitening lips.

Then, the impassive face yielded to pain, contorted and died.

M arose from the corpse, his body trembling in every nerve. Now, he dared not imagine what punishment his captors would fix upon him.

There was a small amount of blood on his hands. He stumbled to the lavatory and rinsed his fingers in running water until they were clean.

He searched his cell. The oppressive walls of the exitless room seemed to be closing in upon him. He had to escape from this sickening chamber of death.

For the twentieth time that day, he rushed to the aluminum ladder and climbed. In the room he entered, a repetition of the scene he had just left met his eyes. The interrogator's body lay stretched across the floor, dead pupils staring emptily. The prisoner retreated to the corner and again mounted the rungs. Room after room greeted him thus, as he climbed. His breath now heaved in great gasps; his muscles were strained to the point of unendurable weakness.

Then, he felt himself fainting and the rungs of the ladder slipped from his grasp. He was churned in a revolving vortex, falling and spinning toward the center, and then he knew no more.

Click!

It was like a key turning in his brain.

Click! Click! A curtain rising. A hidden world unveiled.

Identity came to him in a sudden burst of knowledge. He remembered swallowing the lethene pill himself, when the guards of the hidden factory were nearly on him. The sudden flashes of memory he had borne in the past hour now became a veritable explosion.

He was Dr. John C. Markum, former professor of mathematics at Oregon Institute of Technology, U. S. A. He taught seminar courses in abstract spaces, linear vector spaces, and abstract polynomials. He had been an ordnance captain in the War of 1958. Seven months ago, he had been recalled to the New Pentagon and transferred to Intelligence. Seven weeks ago, he had volunteered for a special mission in Europe.

Seven eternities ago.

His cortical control was returning, as his memory cells cleared. He scowled at the dead form before him. Filthy beast, he thought. Execrable sadist.

AWARENESS of his predicament super-stimulated his adrenals. Trapped in a Moebius cube! The construction of such an object was theoretically possible; yet practically—he shook his head, mournfully. He tried to calculate the number of dimensions a space would require for torsion of a cube into possession of a surface of connectivity.

The guards would be coming soon, when the officer did not reappear. He calculated his chances with them and dismissed them. Yet, there had to be some method of escape. He studied the walls and ceiling, lowered to his hands and knees and minutely explored the floor; yet, he discovered no sign of a joint or outlet. Electricity evidently flowed through the single blue bulb above and water flowed out of the lavatory faucets, originating somewhere. Perhaps the room collapsed and reassembled itself at 60-cycles per second. A longer collapse would also account for the interrogator's ability to enter and leave the room.

Markum put on his shirt, feeling gingerly the wound near his shoulder. In his pockets, he found the pencil, cigarette pack and lighter that had been left him. He unscrewed the lighter, examined it carefully. The enemy still had a great deal to learn about one-sided surfaces. The case was a variant of a Klein bottle and contained in its hidden section several drams of the new jet fuel being manufactured in the Kara sector.

He scooped up the mathematical notes he had made and studied them. Apparently, his subconscious mind had been aware at the offset of the problem he faced; the symbols appeared to point to a solution. He tried to recall observations that had appeared in papers by Kerejarto and Lefschetz.

The oppression of the four walls was too overpowering. He had an idea now how Clive's Englishmen had felt in the Black Hole of Calcutta.

Markum removed the apron of interrogation tools off the dead man and regarded an object with a burr on its tip, much like a dentist's drill. He hooked it up to the battery, moved to a wall and commenced to drill. A slight buzzing noise accompanied the incision. Suddenly, resistance gave and the drill pushed through. Markum's ears caught the sound of plaster falling. He wheeled around and saw on the opposite wall, the drill tip protruding into the room in which he stood.

The officer had been right. The room opened only on itself on all sides, regardless of the absence of vertical entranceways.

The prisoner returned to the table, commenced to apply new mathematics to his calculations. Sweat poured from his brow. He paused briefly, went through a brief series of Intelligence Section-drilled exercises for heart-beat stimulations. His pulse accelerated, as his mind shifted into high gear. Time was urgent.

Finally, his equations were completed; but he looked at them with dread. There existed dire possibilities in following the course prescribed, many even predicating the probability of losing oneself in extra-dimensional spaces outside the known universe. But topologically, there was no other action to be taken. The equations told only what should be done—not what would be the result!

Markum was now desperate. He gnawed wood off the pencil until its point again was sharp. Then consulting his symbols, he drew a curved line across the floor of the room, along the wall and by dint of much stretching from the ladder across the room's ceiling and down the opposite wall.

The task was only half done. Again examining the assortment of torture tools, Markum picked out one with a rotary blade that presupposed great slicing effect. Connecting it with the battery

he drilled along the path of the line he had drawn, slicing the ceiling and walls. Then before continuing to follow the line's path on the floor, he drew a square about three feet from the line.

This completed, he proceeded to slice through the remainder of the line with the tool. When only one foot remained, he unhooked a slat from the cot and tied the handle of the cutting tool to it. Then standing in the protected square, he held the cutting tool above the last portion of drawn line to be sliced—being careful that no part of his body projected past the square.

THE two sections of the room commenced to separate as the floor was split. A rocking effect, like a mild earthquake, set in. Markum felt new dizziness. Where the walls had drawn apart, there now penetrated an eyewrenching darkness, yet the air in the room showed no tendency to leak away.

The bouncing motion increased. Then as Markum watched, the darkness between the separating sections of the room lightened and he made out star clusters. With chilled recognition, he knew he was looking into deep space far from any comfortable planet. The stars wavered, vanished. Now, a giant blazing sun swung into view, tongues of flame soaring into yellow prominences. Then, a view of a landscape populated by curious globes and parallelopipeds.

The giant sun reappeared, followed by a glimpse of an endless red desert above which three ringed satellites raced through a starless sky.

Scene upon scene crowded in upon Markum's consciousness as the rift between the room's two sections widened. His brain reeled at the almost infinite number of vistas that pressed in and crowded each other for his attention.

How, how out of all of them to select the right one?

Then, finally, the rocking motion ceased and the other half of the room vanished.

Markum knew he had to make his choice now or never. Stooping, he applied the second drill to the lines of the square on which he stood. Having no slicing edge, the operation took longer; Markum, therefore, had to pause twice to calm his nerves, now over-exhilarated by the effect of the cortical exercises.

Then suddenly, the square was completely excised and it fell away from the floor of the room, Markum's body borne with it as though he stood in iron shoes that clung to a magnetized section of plate iron.

Again, as when he had climbed the ladder rungs in the Moebius room, he found himself floating in a spinning vortex. Blood poured into his skull and a red mist, similar to that experienced by pilots in rocket dives, rendered him unconscious. . . .

The next thing of which John C. Markum, Ph.D., was aware—and he could not have guessed how much time had elapsed since his faint—was his effort to open his eyelids. He struggled and struggled to pry the skin flaps apart; but for what seemed an eternity, the muscles about his eyes refused to obey the intense command of his will.

He knew why—quite well. His too-human brain feared what he might see.

But finally, the will triumphed.

He gazed up at a spacious white ceiling from which glowed two even banks of luminescent lights. Cool air fanned his cheeks. Bent over him was a kindly white face of a woman in starched nurse's uniform.

"Where am I?" Markum asked, weakly.

The woman did not answer. She turned away and addressed another person present: "He's conscious, now. Would you like to talk to him, sir?"

"Indeed I would—been through quite an ordeal, apparently."

MARKUM moved his head around. The voice had been familiar; now the appearance confirmed his suspicion of the speaker's identity. His chief at

the New Pentagon, General Harper, was at his bedside. The general said: "Congratulations, Markum. I don't know how you managed to get through the lines and back to America, but it was a wonderful job, however you did it. We got your fuel sample analyzed; imagine we'll be synthesizing it ourselves in a month. Now, if your strength's up to it, let's have your story."

"Yes, sir," said Markum. "Just one thing, General. Mind telling me where I was found?"

The general smiled: "About two blocks from the Library of Congress. Clad in gray denim and sandals. And moaning about some fellow named Moebius."

"A great mathematician," Markum explained. "Founded the science of topology."

The bedfast man then elucidated in detail his experience behind the lines of the Pan-Eurasian Combine, culminating with his escape from the endless room.

"We 'highbrows' of higher math like to think every problem can be solved, if its component elements are set up properly. Sometimes we have to invent imaginary numbers or situations as tools to manipulate the factors in a problem, however. Now, you take this room I've just described. As soon as I'd calculated the equations for its construction, I realized it could be collapsed by the incision of a re-entrant section. You know how a Moebius sheet may be bilateralized by such a section, thus affecting its connectivity.

"I performed the same operation on the Moebius cube. Result: instead of null connectivity, we developed infinite connectivity and a high number of boundaries. Once that was accomplished, all I had to do was jump off the square whenever I located a boundary contiguous to non-Combine soil. If I'd had a calculating machine with me, I believe I could have stepped right into the Pentagon."

The general stroked his chin: "From what you learned, do you suppose our technicians could make a similar cube?"

Markum laughed: "We can do better. We can build one the size of a fort, slice it with re-entrant sections at any point —and thus, step out into any part of the globe we choose."

"Hmm," said the general.

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"Hmm. I was just thinking. Won't their leader be surprised when a battalion of our troops march out of thin air into his bedroom?"

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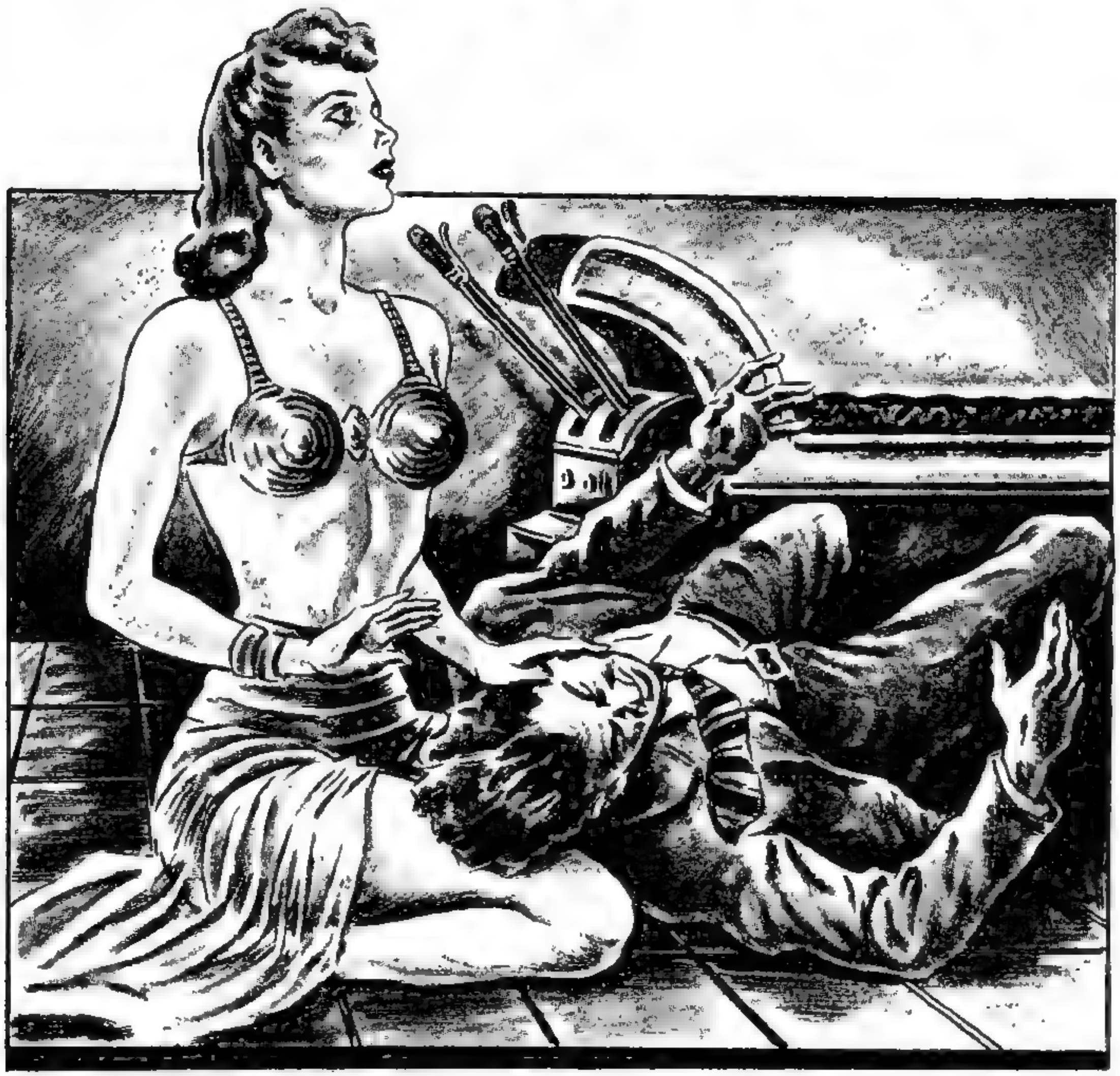

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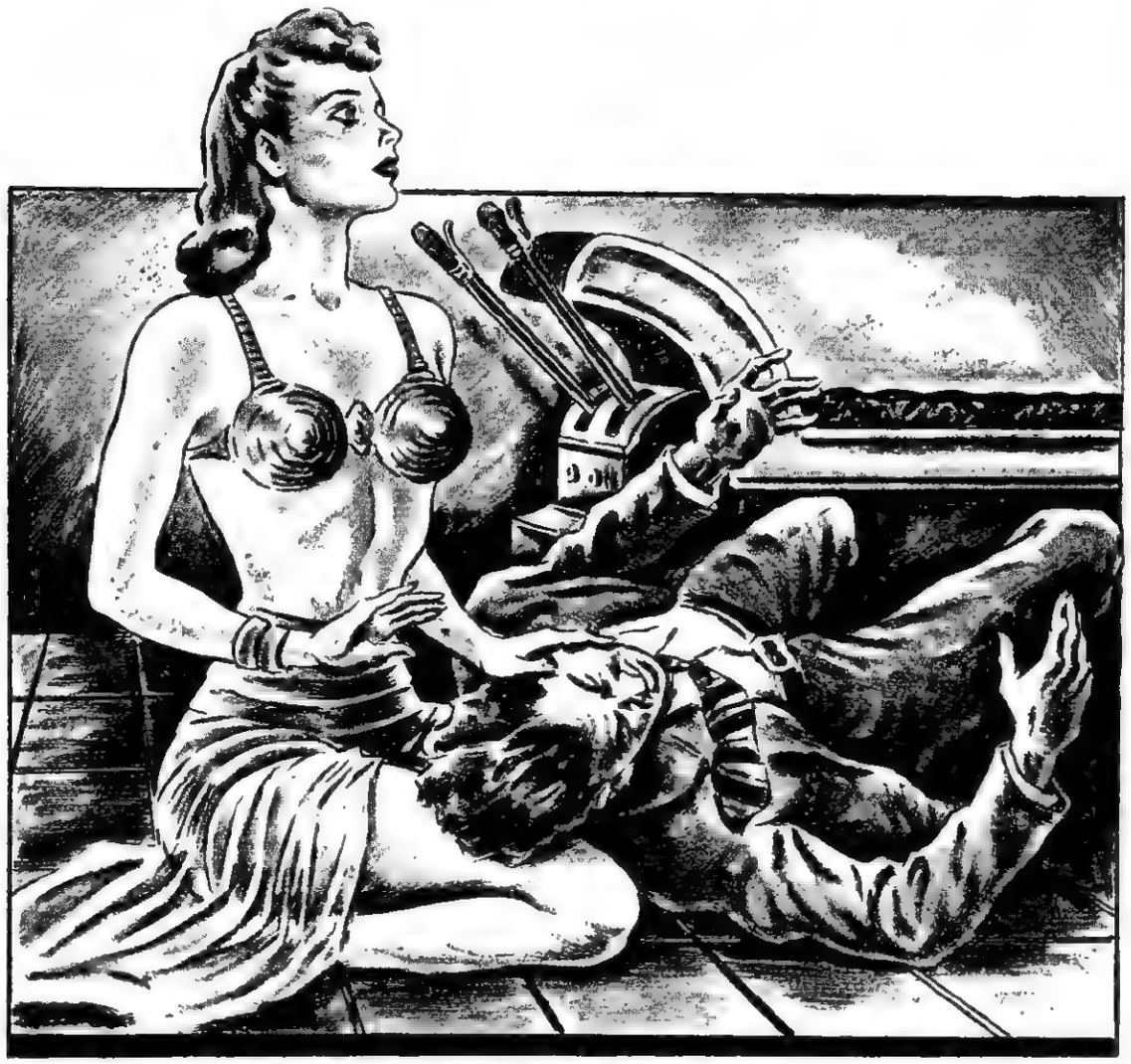

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A Novelet by

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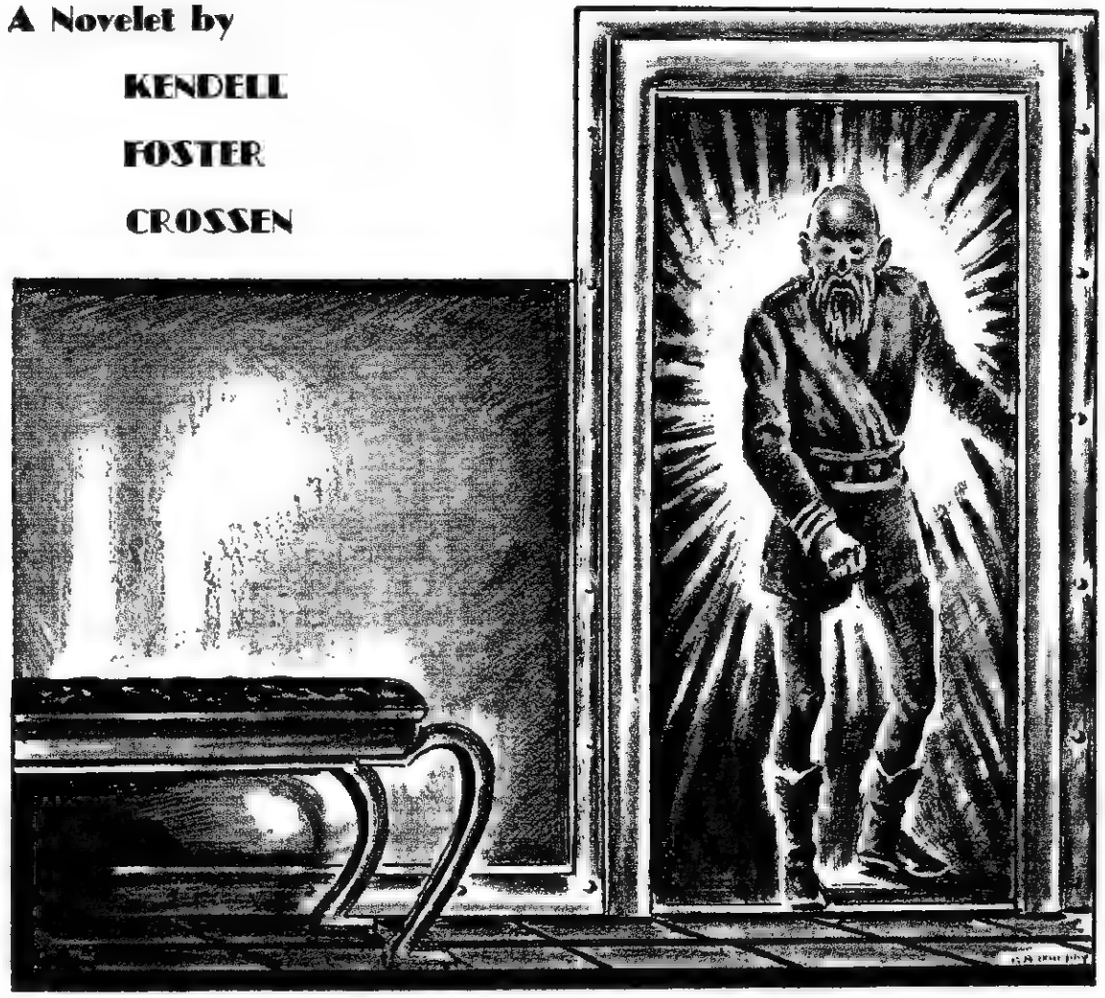

The old guy looked like he was going to a fancy costume ball

IT WASN'T quite dark when I got home that night. I'd stopped off at the Automat for dinner. Then I'd taken the subway uptown and walked the three blocks to my house. House. It was a kitchen-livingroom-and-bedroom bungalow four blocks from the Bronx Zoo. Usually there were too many empty beer bottles around that I'd forgotten to take back to the store, and sometimes I was just too tired to clean up. But it was a place where I could get away from the 17th Precinct, squeal books, cheap heisters and the general dirt I had to dig around in for the best part of the day.

For two months I'd been on one case and there was still no break. I'd been coming home and brooding over it. If I didn't come up with something before long, I was going to be back on a beat. My future was about as bright as a Confederate dollar. But that night I was going to have so much future I wouldn't know what to do with it.

I walked into the house and tossed my coat on the studio couch. I unbuckled my shoulder holster and hung it on the knob of the clothes closet. Then, just out of habit, I walked to the window and looked out at the house next door.

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The girl next door had moved there three months before. I'd noticed her

right away. About five feet three. Maybe a hundred and fifteen pounds. Blue-black hair that reached to her shoulders. I'd guessed her eyes were blue even though I'd never gotten close enough to check it. And a figure that made me start to whistle the minute I saw it. I spent a week wondering how it would be if I went over to borrow a cup of bourbon. Then something happened that made me put it off.

It was just about then that orders came through to every precinct to keep an eye out for spies and saboteurs. The race was getting a little tighter. A general's diary had vanished and a week later *Pravda* was quoting from it. The plans for a new guided missile had been lifted from some scientist while he was in New York on his way to Washington. So in addition to everything else, the Commissioner wanted us to look for spies.

It was the same day that I noticed the girl next door had a lot of visitors. Men and women. All of them strange. They were dressed like anyone else in New York, but they acted like they weren't used to it. There were other things. Little things. A guy would stop to look at a car parked on the street. He'd walk all around it, peer in the windows, touch it with his finger, as if he'd never seen one before. A girl would stop to look at a flower. She'd rub the petals like they were something alien to her.

They always came and went in twos. Sometimes I'd see a couple of them leave her house, then in exactly two hours they'd be back. I wouldn't see them again, or maybe I'd see them a week later. But I didn't think any of them lived there with her.

The girl next door had become my personal busman's holiday. Whenever I was off duty, I was home watching through the window. I already knew a lot about her, but none of it made any sense. The blinds were never up on the ground floor; they were never drawn on the second floor. She slept in a second floor bedroom on my side of the house. She always went to bed before midnight. When she was in the house she wore shorts and a halter that didn't leave much to the imagination; when she took them off I knew imagination would have fallen short of the truth.

SOMETIMES in the afternoon she'd go out in the backyard. There was a small flower garden there and she'd putter around in it. Or just sit looking at it.

I'd never seen her with any of the others. And I'd never seen her step out of the front door. That was something else. I checked around the neighborhood, but she'd never been in any of the stores. And there weren't any deliveries made. I thought maybe her visitors brought in groceries, but I never saw them carrying anything.

I should have handed in a report on her and let someone else worry about it. But I'd gotten to feel that I almost knew her. Even though I had no answer to what was going on, I couldn't believe she was a spy. So I kept watching, thinking maybe I'd see something that would make some sense. Besides I liked watching her.

She wasn't in sight when I went to the window that night. There was a light upstairs, but that was all. I decided to get a beer from the refrigerator and make myself comfortable. Then my front door bell rang.

I turned on some lights and went to the door. The bell rang again just as I opened the door.

It was the girl from next door. Her eyes were blue. I noticed that before anything else.

"Hello," I said.

"Lieutenant Mark Dane?" she asked. Her voice was like I'd thought it would be. Low and soft—almost breathless.

I grinned. "You've got the name right," I said, "but you're a little off on the rank. It's Detective First Grade. The way I'm going I'll make lieutenant when I'm about eighty. Won't you come in?"

She'd blushed when I corrected her

about the rank. That was another strange thing. But on her it looked good. She stepped inside and looked around. I made the usual noises about the condition of the room.

"Are you—is Mrs. Dane around?" she asked.

"No Mrs. Dane," I said. "Not even any prospects."

She blushed again. "I'm sorry," she said. "Do you know who I am?"

"The girl next door," I said gravely.

She seemed to like the way I said it. "I am Leesa Doon," she said. "I've always wanted to meet you, but I wasn't sure I should."

That didn't make sense either, but I let it lay. "Dane-Doon," I said. "That makes us almost related—but not quite, I'm glad to say."

That amused her. I didn't know why. "I—I'm in a little trouble," she said. "I wonder if you would help me?"

"Anything," I said. I meant it, too. Up to a point. "What's the trouble?"

"Could you come over to my house?" she asked.

At that point a lot of ideas went through my head. I didn't like most of them. But I only nodded and put on my coat. Then I crossed over, as though to make sure my radio was turned off, snaking my gun out of the holster as I went. I dropped it into my coat pocket. I wanted to go to her house, but I didn't want to try flying on less than one wing.

WE WALKED across and went into her house. I'm not sure what I expected, but there was nothing. It looked like any other middle class home. There was obviously no one else in the house. It had that empty feeling. I took my hand out of my pocket and followed her into the living room.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked.

I nodded. She went back toward the kitchen. I got up and walked around the room. It was about as suspicious as a Grandma Moses painting.

She came back with two small glasses. They were filled with something that was the golden color of good scotch. Not exactly my drink but I figured looking at her would make up for the drink. I raised my glass.

"To you," I said. I'd decided her trouble wasn't very serious if she could take time to serve drinks. Then I tilted the drink. It wasn't scotch. In fact, it wasn't anything I'd ever tasted before. It was smooth and when it was down it started a whole chain of little fires. It wasn't vodka either.

"Nice," I said. "What is it?"

"Lunosa," she said. "It's made from crushed moon flowers."

I looked at her. She wasn't even smiling. "Well, that's the way it goes some days," I said lightly. "Every question I ask, I get a sucker answer."

"You doubt me?" she asked. There was a little frown between her eyes. "But it really is Lunosa."

"Okay," I said. If that was her idea of a joke, it was all right with me. I didn't expect a woman to have everything. "Now, what's your trouble, Leesa?"

"I'm from the future," she said.

I looked at the glass in my hand, but it was empty. "From where?" I asked casually.

"The future," she said gravely. "The year 2957, to be exact."

"Okay," I said. I set my glass down. "I'm from next door myself. And it's time I was getting back. Thanks for the drink." I got up. She was as beautiful as hell, but I didn't want to tangle with a girl who was that much off her rocker.

"Please," she said. Something in her voice made me sit down again in spite of my good intentions. "I know you think I'm crazy, but give me a chance to prove to you that I'm from the future. Will you, Mark?"

"Okay," I said. I had a sudden vision of what my precinct captain would have said about this and I grinned.

She leaned toward me. "You've heard of time machines, haven't you?"

"Sure," I said. "H. G. Wells and a hundred imitators. I can read and every-

thing. I even know about a guy out in Mattewan who thinks the State of New York didn't electrocute him because they knew it wouldn't work. He'd been training by poking his finger in electric light sockets. I've heard of a lot of things."

"I will show you our time machine," she said. "Then you will have to believe. Come on."

If I were going to humor her, I had to do it all the way. I followed her out of the room and down the hall.

She stopped in front of a closed door. I noticed that someone had rigged up a little light above it. She took out a key from somewhere and put it in the lock. There was a click and the door swung open.

It was a good try. I had to give her that much. I'd never seen a room like it before. The walls, ceiling and floor all seemed made of some strange, gleaming metal. The room was bare except for a long, low couch against one wall. A short rod, like the gearshift of a car, thrust up from the far end of the couch. There were no windows in the room.

"This it?" I asked her.

She nodded.

"Bad planning," I said gravely. "When you send it ahead into time it must leave a big hole in the house."

LEESA DOON stamped her foot angrily. "No, no, you must not make fun. We made three trips before we found this house. Then we made another trip, landing in the back yard at night, and measured this room and fixed its location. Then we built a time machine which would just fit into this room."

"How's it work?" I asked. I wondered how far she'd carry this.

"It's really very simple," she said, "even though you have no clear idea of it in your time. But starting with v—(R/m²—R/n²)/h, you go on to—"

"Never mind," I interrupted. "I never got beyond if-two-apples-cost-five-cents-how-much-do-eleven-apples-cost myself. All right if I take a look?" I stepped inside the room without waiting for her answer.

"I—I guess so," she said doubtfully from behind me. "But don't touch the control."

I couldn't help wondering what the gear shift really did, if anything. I made a show of testing the walls. Then I walked over and put one hand on the couch. With the other one I reached for the knob.

"Mark! Don't—" she started to cry. Then I heard the door slam just before I pulled the lever.

It was a little like the time I crash-landed a B-29 during the war. A big unseen hand slapped me over on the couch. There were spots in front of my eyes. I could hear a distant roaring. I didn't feel like doing much thinking, but I wondered if there'd been a bomb on the other end.

Then it was over. I was still in the same room, feeling a little shaky.

"Leesa," I called. I sat up on the couch.

The door opened. But instead of Leesa, there was a guy standing there. An old guy, dressed in something that made him look like he was going to one of those fancy costume balls. I could see past him into a room. All I could see was a big cube of shining light, so strong it looked solid.

"Jhan—" the old man began. He sounded angry. Then he caught a good look at me and his expression changed. It was as startled as I felt. He slammed the door shut.

I was getting tired of having that door slammed. I got up and started toward it, feeling in my pocket for the gun. Then the hand came up and slapped me again. This time I didn't make the couch. I felt my head hit the floor. I blacked out.

When I came to I was still on the floor of that room. My head was on something soft and warm. I slitted my eyes just enough to see. It was Leesa, holding my head on her lap. She was strok-

ing my forehead with her hand. It felt so good, I kept my eyes closed for another minute. Then I remembered the old guy and I opened my eyes. It was still Leesa.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. There was a throbbing in my head. I reached up and explored it. There was a small egg above one ear. I stood up and helped her to her feet. Then I led the way out of the room. Whatever had happened, I wasn't ready for another go at it yet.

"You shouldn't have done it," she said severely. "If you had moved the controls while I still had the door open, we both would have been badly hurt."

"The old guy," I said. "He was real then? Not something I just dreamed up?"

She took a couple of minutes to answer. "If I didn't need your help," she said, "I'd tell you that you fell when you first entered the room and must have dreamed the whole thing. But that was Roba Penn, custodian of the timeports. He'll be furious with me, but it can't be helped."

"And the cube of light I saw?" I asked.

"A timeport. That was where another of the time machines will arrive when it returns to my time. Now do you believe me?"

I've been on the cops long enough to think like a cop. If a guy belts me over the head with the barrel of a gun, I get the idea that maybe he doesn't like me. But I also hold on the thought that maybe he did it because he wanted me to have that idea.

"I'll buy it until something better comes along," I said. "Now, why?"

"This is a time station," she said. "It's my job to take care of it. We have time stations that are scattered all through the past."

"Why?" I asked again.

"Research. We are trying to rewrite the history of the earth. Thousands of students, each working on his own specialty, are doing the work."

I caught at the one word that had stuck out. "Rewrite?"

THE girl nodded. "The earth's records were almost completely destroyed by what was known as the Third World War. What wasn't destroyed during the war was burned or torn up by the survivors. They blamed the war on science and knowledge—and they tried to eradicate all knowledge. They succeeded so well that in my time we have been unable to find a single complete book. We have pages from some, in a few cases as much as half a book. But that's all."

"What do you want of me?" I asked.

"The discovery of the time travel formula," she said, "brought problems with it. The most important was that anyone going to an earlier period must not under any circumstances interfere in any way. They must be only observers. To act otherwise might change the whole future."

"I know about that," I said. "The fiction writers hit on it. If you go back in time and kill your own grandfather what happens to you?"

"That's an over-simplification of it," she said. "Of course, it's only a theory, but one we dare not test."

I thought about it, but my mind kept pulling back to something she'd said. "This Third World War," I said. "When is it going to happen? Right away?"

She shook her head. "I cannot tell you. That is also part of it. We must not give anyone in the time we visit information concerning their future. If you had foresight, you might interfere."

"Why not use the theory?" I asked. "Why not go back and rid the world of the man who caused the war?"

"Who?" she asked. "The man who first split the atom? The man who discovered the quantum theory? The man who ordered a bomb dropped? Who? It is not a man who causes war, but the attitudes of all men. And if we stopped the war my world knows about, might not another and possibly more destructive war take its place?"

"Okay," I said. "It was only a question."

"Because of the limitations, we have ruled that students must not spend more than two hours observing at any one time. It is a very strict rule. It is never broken. This afternoon two of our students came through my station. They have now been in your city for two and a half hours. Jhan Milla and Wil Drom."

"The old guy I saw," I said. "He called me Jhan at first. He sounded angry."

"He is. And frightened. As I am. Their lateness means that they are in some way involved with this time. Any moment they may interfere, without even meaning to. Any moment the future, my world, may vanish or change completely. We have to find them."

"Two men out of eight million," I said. "Why should I worry about your future? Maybe if they interfere it'll stop that third world war—and that's in *my* future."

She smiled. A tight little smile. "You —and everyone else in your time—are a part of the future. If a stream is dammed up, every drop of water is affected."

"But why me?" I wanted to know.

"Jhan Milla and Wil Drom were here to study crime."

"What crime?" I asked.

"Any crime that occurred during their period of study. Since they have not returned, it must mean that they became involved in a crime. We must find them quickly. It is only a matter of checking the crimes committed in the past three hours."

"Sure," I said. "That ought to be easy. Probably weren't any more than a thousand crimes committed in that time."

"But you can find out," she said. "Please."

"Okay," I said. "I'll do my best. Where's your phone?"

"Phone? Oh, that is your method of communication. I do not have one."

"Come on back to my place then."

SHE followed me across to the bungalow, and I started calling precincts and asking the desk sergeants what they had on their squeal books for the last three hours. I got plenty of answers. Armed-robbery, breaking and entry, assault, homicide, rape, soliciting. I had my pick, but there wasn't anything that mentioned any innocent bystanders. I was about to suggest that maybe her two boys had started their own crime wave, when I hit the eighth desk sergeant.

"You on duty?" he asked me when I identified myself.

"No, I'm on days this week," I said. "Why?"

"You'd better check in with them," he said. "Every precinct has been alerted. The general alert just came through about three minutes ago."

"What's up?"

"Kidnapping about two hours ago. Two unidentified men grabbed Marta Wilkins from in front of her house."

"Wilkins?" I said. It clicked. "You mean the Commissioner's daughter?"

"I do indeed," the desk sergeant said. "This is one that better be sewed up quick or half the New York Police Force will be out in Staten Island. There'll be captains and probationers riding the ferry together."

"What have they got on it?"

"Practically nothing. That's why they're setting the precincts on fire. Some old dame was looking out of her window and saw it, but couldn't get a description of anything. She thinks that there was one or two witnesses on the street and the kidnappers took them along. She says there was one shot fired. And there's something funny."

"What?"

"There's a big elm tree in front of the Commissioner's house and it's been blasted like it was struck by lightning. Everybody swears there was no storm . . . okay, Dane. If this keeps up, boy, you'd better press your old blues."

I disconnected, then called the 17th. They had tried to reach me, but the line

was busy. I told them I already knew about it and was practically on my way. Our sergeant sounded worried.

I told Leesa about it. The innocent bystanders reported by the old dame might be her students. If so, they were being held by whoever had grabbed the Police Commissioner's daughter. As an afterthought, I threw in the information about the blasted tree. Her face went white.

"It's Jhan and Wil," she said.

"Why do you say so?" I asked. "The tree?"

"Do you have weapons that will do that?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"It means that one of them broke the rule," she said, "and brought along an energy gun. Your criminals would like it."

"Probably no more than they like Wells Fargo trucks," I said.

"Mark! We must get to them quickly!"

"That's all," I agreed. I looked at her. "If our guess is right, your boys are being held by the same two who have the Commissioner's daughter. Orders have gone out from every precinct to every cop, on duty or off, to get in touch with any underworld contact he has and to get rough. There are twenty thousand cops giving this town the damnedest combing it's ever had. What makes you think we have a chance of getting there first?"

"But we must!"

"Yeah, but how? Obviously nobody has a clue to who made the snatch. Now, if you had some idea of what your two boys were working on. Don't they keep any records about where students are going, or what they're going to try to check?"

"Sometimes," she said doubtfully. "I could go back and ask."

"That's our only chance, Leesa," I said. "How long will it take you?"

"Fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Let's go," I said.

We went back to the big house. She told me to help myself to a drink in the kitchen and then she went into that room. The light above the door flashed on.

I went into the kitchen and rummaged around. After a while I found the bottle and poured myself a drink. I looked at the label. It said *Lunosa, vintage 2923.*

I was on my third drink when I heard the door. A moment later she came into the kitchen. There was a smile on her face.

"I found something," she cried. "Jhan and Wil mentioned that they were interested in a famous criminal of this period. All that is known about him in my period is that his name is Lew Costanni and he's in some place called Mattewan. You know this place?"

"It's a nut house," I said. She looked puzzled, so I explained. "Where they lock up the criminally insane. Maybe Lew Costanni belongs there, but nobody's put him in yet."

"You know him?" she asked.

YEAH, I knew him. Lew Costanni was my case. He had been for two months. He and a guy named Joe Barden. They were tough boys. From Chicago. They'd arrived in New York about six months earlier. Shortly afterward a lot of new jobs showed up on the Gold Coast—that long section on the East side that has more diamonds per square foot than any other spot in America. The 16th and 17th precincts took care of that section and that's how the case landed in my lap. For two months I'd eaten, slept and dreamed Lew Costanni. I'd pulled him in three times for questioning and got nowhere. I'd tried to track down everyone who'd ever heard of him and tried to pump them. I knew that he'd pulled the jobs—the whole precinct knew it—but I didn't have any more proof than I had the first day I was assigned to it.

"I know Lew Costanni," I admitted.

"Oh," she said in relief, "then we'll have Jhan and Wil back in no time."

I looked at her. She wasn't kidding.

"What makes you so sure?" I asked.

"The one thing we do know about your period," she said, "is that you had many great detectives and I'm sure you're one too. We have parts of many books, but one of our half-books is the biography of a great detective. Perhaps you know him."

"Who?"

"Philip Marlowe," she said.

I took another look at her. I've been kidded by experts, but she was leveling. "Look, honey," I said, "I got news for you. This Marlowe is a fictional character. A guy named Chandler writes about him. A terrific writer. But it's still in a book. Me, I'm just an ordinary plainclothesman. I slog along, putting the squeeze on some stoolie to whistle, once in a while slugging the story out of a guy, maybe sometimes stumbling over something. If I work hard enough and I'm lucky, I solve the case."

"Oh," she said. She sounded so disappointed I didn't have the heart to go on.

"Don't worry, honey," I said. "Maybe this is my night to be lucky. Anyway, I'll do my best. Come on."

She stretched up on her toes and kissed me. Then she turned and darted toward the front door. I followed. The only trouble with the kiss—it had been the kind you see little girls giving their elderly grandfathers. And me only thirty.

When we got to the corner, I decided to splurge. I hailed a cab and told him to take us downtown.

I had one guy on the Costanni case I'd been softening up. He was another tough boy out of Chicago. He'd never blown the whistle on anyone in his life, but I'd heard he didn't like Costanni. So I'd gotten the idea that a little patience might wear him down. I'd pulled him in once and I'd taken to dropping in on him occasionaly. He wasn't ripe yet, but I decided he'd have to be picked green. That's where we were going.

Then I got to thinking about the kidnapping itself. It was funny, when I started looking it over. I knew all about Lew and he'd always shied away from anything that could bring the Feds in. So why had he suddenly pulled a snatch? And especialy the Commissioner's daughter. The more I thought of it, the more it smelled like a hostage business. I leaned over and tapped the cabbie on the shoulder and told him to take us to the precinct.

I left Leesa in the cab and went inside. The place was deserted.

"Hi, Charlie," I said to the desk sergeant. "You got anything big on the books tonight?"

He looked at me like he thought I'd blown my top. "Well," he said dryly, "there was something about some girl being kidnapped. Name of Wilkins, or something like that. There was a rumor the Commissioner was interested in the case, but I guess it was just gossip."

I grinned. "I heard," I said. "Everybody out on it?"

"Everybody but me and the captain," he said. "The captain's locked himself in his office with a bottle. He's just going to forget about it and wake up in the morning busted or a hero."

"Smart," I said. "Now, was there anything big in our precinct?"

"Nobody's been interested," he said. "But there was one. Rita LaNorr, the movie star, claims somebody lifted her rocks. A quarter of a million dollars. I told her we'd send somebody over in the morning."

I NODDED, thinking. If Lew had pulled this one too, it made close to two million dollars he'd taken in eight months. None of it had been fenced. And he thought he needed a hostage. The heat was on him all right, but not that much. On a hunch, I went into the bull room and used a phone. On the fourth call I hit it. Somebody named Lew Cost was sailing at midnight on the *S. S. Secolo* for Italy. That was three hours away.

I went out fast, not even hearing the question Charlie threw at me. I got in the cab and gave the driver the address.

It was a bar on Third Avenue. A lot of fast money went there, but so did a lot of the Broadway and newspaper people. They had a few rooms in the back for private dinners or parties. It was the place where Pete Malchik hung out. He was the guy I'd been nursing along.

"There's a guy in here who maybe can help us out," I told Leesa. "I'm going in to see him, but I won't be long."

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"It'll be rough."

"I'm coming with you," she repeated stubbornly.

"Okay," I said. I paid off the cabbie and went inside. It was crowded, but I spotted Pete in a booth in the back. With a flashy blonde.

I called the bartender over and slipped him ten bucks. "I want to use one of the dining rooms for a few minutes," I said. "No waiter."

He nodded and went back to tending bar. Leesa and I walked back and stopped beside the booth. I waited until they both looked up.

"I want to se you in the back a minute, Pete," I said. I made it as casual as I could.

I was right about him not being ripe. He just grinned at me and nodded. He told the girl he'd be back, then walked ahead of me into the first dining room. I had my gun out when I stepped through the door.

"Get them up," I told him. "Keep out of the way, Leesa."

She crossed to the other end of the room without saying anything. I took Pete's gun and slipped it in my pocket. I sat on the edge of the table and looked at him. There was a little flicker deep in his eyes that made me surer that I could speed up the process.

"Where's Lew Costanni?" I asked.

"Why ask me?" he said. "I don't know nothing about Lew. Why don't you try his hotel?"

"He won't be there tonight," I said. "I want to know where to find him right now."

He shrugged.

"The heat's on," I said casually. "You know, Pete, I could take you in right now and not book you. I could start precinct hopping you and see to it that you got beaten up in every pr nct. We've got some cops that are specialists with a nightstick." That look was in his eyes again. "But I'm not going to do it. All you have to do is tell me where to find Lew."

"I don't know, copper. I told you that."

I flipped a backhand at him, so the barrel of my Positive caught him full in the mouth. He went back against the wall and when he straightened up, he spit two teeth out. There was hatred and fear in his eyes.

He said something. It was a short ugly word, but the missing teeth made it sound funny.

This time I put the barrel of the gun right against his cheek bone. Not too hard. Just enough to break the skin and put him on his knees. I didn't like stuff like that, but there wasn't enough time to work any other way. Pete was the only one I think of who might know where I could find Lew, and was certainly the only contact that wasn't already getting a going over. There were twenty thousand cops plus looking for something, the plus being Federal men. I had to break Pete and break him fast.

"Make it easy on yourself, Pete," I said. "Tonight is different from any other night. I could beat you to a pulp in front of a television camera and the Commissioner would only pin a medal on me."

HE DIDN'T know what I meant, but he got the rest of it. He got to his feet and tried the same ugly word again. Just for size. But his heart wasn't in it. I tried his other cheek. He went down faster and stayed there longer.

He stood up and looked at me. His tongue licked out at the blood trickling down his cheek. Then his face fell apart. One minute he was still tough, with only that flicker of fear, and the next he

was just like a piece of putty.

"All I know is what I heard," he said. "They say Lew and Joe are holed up in the Stacey Arms Apartments. In the Village. It's a ground floor apartment. I hear they're pulling out tonight."

I knew the Stacey Arms. Just by accident. I'd had a weak lead that led me to it a week before. I thought the lead hadn't panned out. Now it looked like I'd missed something.

"What you hear is good enough for me, Pete," I said. "I'll see you around."

Leesa and I walked out, leaving him there. As we went past the booths, I dropped Pete's gun in the blonde's lap and told her to give it back to him. We went outside and found a cab.

"Did you have to be that rough?" she asked. It was the first thing she'd said since we entered the bar.

"Honey," I said, "this is no tea party. If our guess is right, Lew Costanni has those two boys of yours. According to you, if we don't get them back quick it'll change the future. I've got the idea that Lew also has the Commissioner's daughter. If we don't get her back quick it'll change the present. Pete is only a chipped comma in the crime statistics."

She was quiet after that. The cabbie let us out at the corner and we walked to the apartment house. There were two ground floor apartments. Both occupied by doctors, according to the name plates. I found an elevator man and learned that Dr. Lanni—initial of his first name, last four letters of his last name—had been there only four months. The other doctor had been there eight years.

We waited until the elevator man went upstairs. I'd coached Leesa. Then we rang the bell beside Dr. Lanni's door.

There was a long silence. I leaned on the button again. Another wait. Finally a voice came through the door.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"The doctor," Leesa said. She did a good job of sounding upset. "It's an emergency."

It took him too long to answer. That and the closed door. You could tell he was being careful. "The doctor's busy," he said finally. "Get the other doctor."

"He's out on a call," she called. "Oh, please. It'll take too long if I have to call the police."

There was another wait. But this one would get them. They'd know if the police were called on an emergency somebody would want to know why the doctor was too busy to take a look.

"Just a minute," he said through the door.

I could hear him unlocking.

I was more than ready. I took out my gun and waited. When I saw the knob starting to turn, I hit the door with everything I had. It sounded good, the way the door cracked him up against the wall. Then I was inside. He was already crumbling, his face becoming a bloody mask, but I helped it along with a rap over the head as I went by. I went fast. Lew wasn't going to be asking any questions about the noise and I had only one chance to make any answers.

There was a reception room, but I went straight through. I stepped into the room beyond and stopped. Lew was there all right. The muzzle of his gun was already lifting to cover the door I came through. It was close. For a second I thought it was going to be closer. Then it was over. He must have seen my finger tightening and knew he couldn't make it. He opened his hand and let the gun fall.

My finger ached and for the same second I wasn't sure that I had stopped the pressure.

I picked up the gun from the floor. Then I went over Lew Costanni. He had another gun in his coat pocket. I collected it.

LEW COSTANNI was starting to get his reaction. He began cursing me and raving about how lucky cops were. He had nothing new to say. I herded him out into the reception room. Joe Barden was still out. I collected another gun, then made Lew drag him into the

other room. I put Lew up against the wall with his hands over his head. Then, for the first time, I looked around.

The Wilkins girl was on the couch. She looked like she was asleep, her breasts rising and falling gently. She was a good-looking girl, with long black hair and peaches-and-cream skin. She looked familiar, but I knew I'd never seen her.

I went over and felt her pulse. It was faint but steady.

"What did you do to her?" I asked Lew.

"Morphine," he said without turning his head. "She'll be out of it in a couple of hours. If you weren't so goddam lucky we'd've been gone by then."

I looked at the rest of the room. Four brand new suitcases all packed. We'd probably find the ice in one of them. Leesa was standing across the room holding something in her hand. It looked like the distant relative of a gun. She was looking down at the floor. The two guys were lying there, all trussed up with ropes. Their shoes and socks were off and there were angry red spots on the bottoms of their feet. Lew had been working on them.

One of them was explaining defensively to Leesa. "I'm sorry," he was saying. "I didn't mean to interfere, but he struck the girl when they grabbed her. I fired before I thought. Fortunately, I missed him and hit that tree. I knew it was a mistake, so I locked the gun and let him take us. He has been trying to force us to tell him how to unlock the gun."

"It is fortunate that you tried to make amends," Leesa said coldly. "But there will still have to be a hearing and some action taken."

"Of course," the guy on the floor said. He sounded almost glad.

"Is that your energy gun?" I asked Leesa.

She nodded.

"How does it work?" I asked curiously. "You mean that little gun can store up enough energy to knock someone out?"

"No," she said. "It creates energy in the target which then destroys it. I doubt if anyone in this century could understand it, although it is related to the theory of atomic fission. We are very fortunate that he did not learn how to use it. It was a narrow escape."

"Well, we've got them now." I said cherfully. "Pick up the phone and—" I broke off. I'd meant to ask her to call in for me, but suddenly I knew it wouldn't do. I'd been accepting her and the two guys on the floor. But I suddenly had a picture of myself trying to tell a desk sergeant about it.

"Yes?" she asked.

"No," I said. "You'd better unwrap your friends and get out of here. Fast."

She didn't question me. She bent down and took the ropes off them. They found their socks and shoes and put them on. They limped a little when they walked, but they'd soon get over it. The cigarette burns would heal quickly enough.

"Better take the ropes with you," I said.

She understood at once. They picked up the ropes and checked over the room to see if there was anything else that belonged to them. Then they were ready to go.

"I'll see you later at the house," I said to Leesa

She shook her head. "The value of that station has been destroyed," she said. It will not be used again."

"Then somewhere else," I said, keeping my voice low. "You can't just walk out of my life like this."

GENTLY she put one hand on my arm. "You don't understand, Mark," she said. "I thought you were about to get it when you noticed how similar my name is to yours. I'm descended from you. Your granddaughter, with about twenty-five greats in front of it."

I looked at her. I felt foolish, and somehow cheated. All I could think to say was: "But I'm not even married."

"You will be," she said. There was a funny little smile on her face and she

was staring beyond me. I turned to follow the direction of her gaze and found myself looking at the unconscious girl on the couch. And suddenly I realized why she had seemed familiar. She and Leesa looked enough alike to be twins.

I stood there staring at her, feeling the back of my neck getting hot. I heard Leesa laugh softly. When I turned around the three of them were gone.

After a while I moved over to the phone and dialed the operator. When she answered, I asked for the police, knowing she'd connect me with the nearest precinct.

"This is Mark Dane," I told the desk sergeant when he answered. "Seventeenth Detective Precinct. I've got the Commissioner's daughter."

He had a few things to say about lucky cops, too—just like Lew Costanni. But he simmered down long enough to get the address.

It wasn't long before the sirens screamed down on the place. Enough cops came tramping in to have won the Korean war. There was a good percentage of brass.

"Nice work," a red-faced captain said to me. "This night ought to do you some good, Dane."

"Yeah," I said, watching two of the cops carry the girl out to an ambulance.

"Ask him more about his work," Lew Costanni suddenly said viciously. "Ask your smart dick about the babe and the two guys he let get away before he called you."

The atmosphere in the room stiffened. All of the cops carefully looked everywhere except where I stood.

"What about them?" one of the detectives asked Costanni.

"He let them walk away," Lew said, jerking a thumb at me. "A good looking babe. She came in with him. I don't know about her, but the guys was from the future."

Everybody relaxed again. One of the detectives winked at me. "I guess Lew is preparing his defense already," he said.

That was four months ago. A lot of things have happened since then. I was promoted. To Lieutenant. Acting Lieutenant, not permanent. I didn't have enough years for the civil service rating. But it was the same money and the same job and when I had enough years they'd make it permanent.

A month ago, Martha Wilkins and I were married. It was a full dress police wedding. The Commissioner gave his daughter away. Later, at the reception, the Commissioner and I got a little high and sang duets.

The detective had been wrong about Lew Costanni's defense. He didn't plead insanity. But he stuck to his story about the men from the future and he didn't have to make the defense. He's in Mattewan.

I had needed only the one hint to keep my mouth shut. Marta had been unconscious all the time. It was only Lew Costanni, Joe Borden and me who'd seen Leesa and her two students. They were on ice for keeps. After a while, the whole thing seemed like something I might have read somewhere.

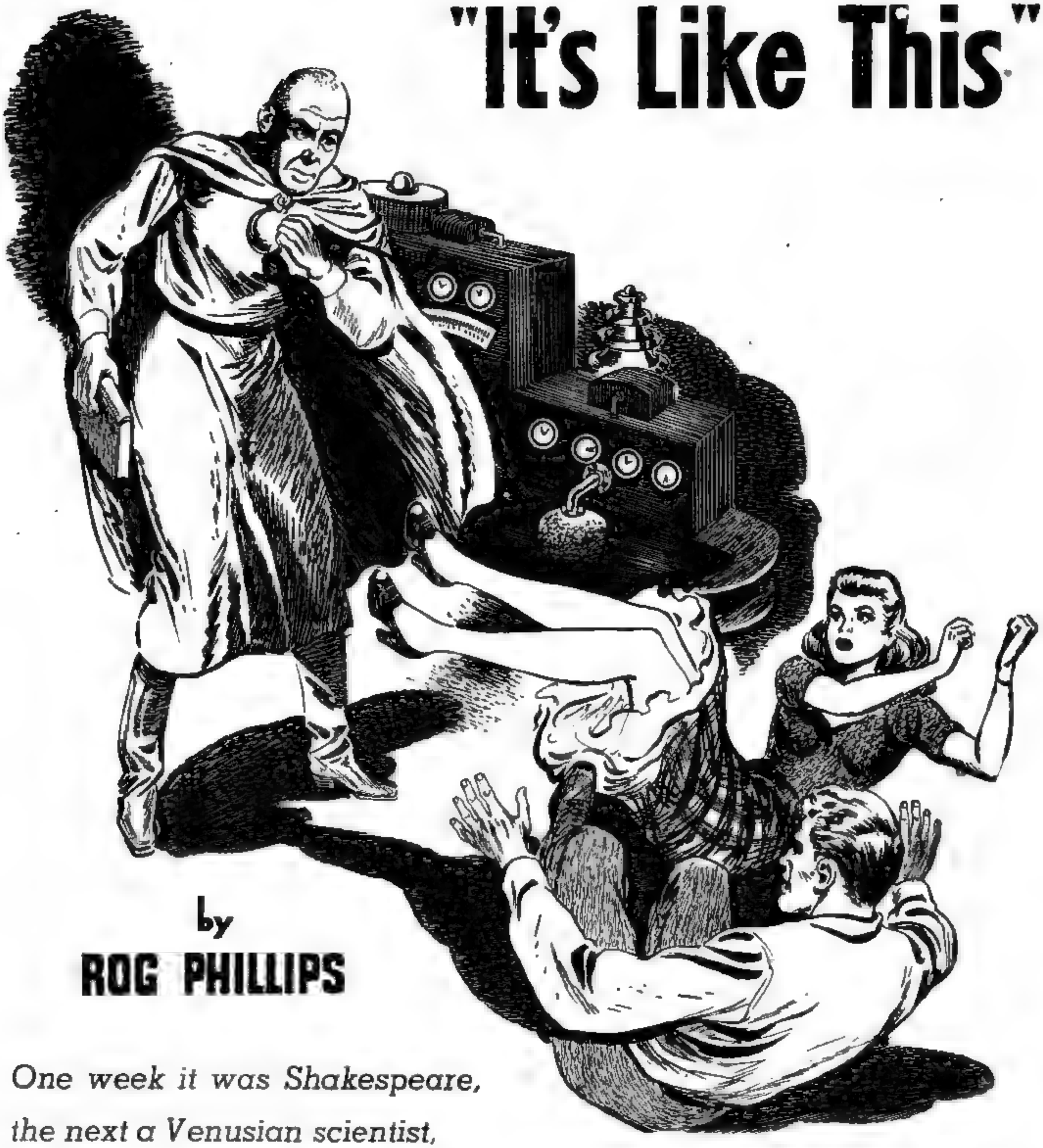
The bungalow is too small for us. We like the neighborhood, but we need a bigger house. So the other day I called the real estate office to ask about the house next door. The broker welcomed me like I was a long lost brother. He quoted a good rental.

"What about the previous tenant?" I asked casually. "She break her lease?"

"The previous tenant?" he repeated. "I don't think so. I really don't remember. To tell you the truth, Lieutenant, the reason I was so glad to get your inquiry is that the house has been empty for five years. We thought we'd never rent it again."

I hung up and went back to work. I had a lot of reports to read. One of them was from a detective who thought he'd discovered a Mata Hari in the apartment next to him. Strange people kept visiting the apartment. It didn't sound like much, so I tossed it in the wastebasket.

"It's Like This"



by

ROG PHILLIPS

One week it was Shakespeare,
the next a Venusian scientist,
but who'd ever believe it?

HOW do you do," the man in the full length yellow robe said.

Lefty Baker ignored him and began working harder than ever. He was breaking lumps of dirt with his fingers and spreading them loosely around the geranium plants of the diamond shaped flower bed.

"My respect for you goes up," the man said after the silence had become slightly heavy, "but still, I must make a start somewhere, so — how do you do?"

"Look, Nero," Lefty said, rising to a squatting position. "Go peddle your papers elsewhere. Scram. Lemme alone."

"You are mistaking me for someone else," yellow robe said. "My name is not Nero, but Huat."

"Don't act tough," Lefty said.

"My name is Huat," yellow robe said patiently.

"And don't engage me in no guessing games," Lefty said, getting to his feet. "I don't care what your name is. It'll be mud if you don't leave me alone. Last month I got mixed up with Shakespeare and kept loaning him my spending money for two weeks while he waited for a check from a publisher for a story he wrote. Why not? It was a good story. Then I found out he was lying to me. He'd sold the story years ago. Why they even had it in the hospital library, and they ain't bought a new book in twenty years, so the guy in Ward C that reads all the time tells me. He's in the flower beds at the north end of the administration building if you want to ask him. So scram. I ain't interested in your line."

"It isn't a line," yellow robe said patiently. "My name really is Huat."

"OK.," Lefty said, sinking to his knees again. "What's in a name?"

"Would you tell me yours?" Huat asked. Then he added hastily, "I see what the difficulty is. My name is spelled aitch you ay tee, and is pronounced like what. Does that make it clear?"

Lefty got it and grinned. "Say," he said, "you must have trouble all the time with it."

"I probably will have," Huat said, "but so far you're the first person I've ever talked to."

"Here we go again," Lefty grumbled. "Look, why don't you go away? I suppose you didn't even talk to your mother when you were a little boy?"

"I didn't have one," Huat said. "But that's beside the point. I mean you're the first person on earth that I've talked to, so far."

"That's what I mean," Lefty said dispiritedly. "I'm not a nut. I'm just an easygoing Joe. But periodically I run into some nut like you, and before I'm through I'm all tied up in mental knots. I'm a magnet for it. Like with you. You go all your life without talking, and then you see me and decide to open your mouth. Why?"

"Because you're the first person on earth I've seen."

"You didn't have a mother," Lefty said. "You never talked to anybody until you decided to talk to me. You've never seen anybody before. Right?" He rose to his feet again, a grim expression on his features.

"Right," Huat said calmly. "I just arrived on earth ten minutes ago. My space ship's there in the middle of the lawn."

He pointed in a direction that cut across a large expanse of lawn and touched one corner of the women's bad wards building.

"Of course you can't see it," he added. "But you can enter it if you know how."

LEFTY squinted at the empty air above the closely cropped lawn. He saw a yellow butterfly suddenly vanish, and reappear again after a moment. As if to add further evidence it swerved back and vanished all over again and didn't reappear.

"Well whatta ya know!" Lefty murmered, wiping his hands on his overalls.

"Where're you from, Huat?" he said, stepping out of the geranium bed onto the lawn beside the yellow-robed man.

"From Venus," Huat said. His expression became sad. "I came to check up on our earth colony, and if you're any indication of how it's turned out I'm going to be very disappointed."

"Well," Lefty said, grinning, "there's plenty more like me. Plenty like you, too. You'll find all kinds. Come on, let's go get inside your spaceship. I've never seen one before."

"All right," Huat said. "But first I want to make an initial classification of your gene structure."

"My what?" Lefty asked.

"Hmmm," Huat said, standing back and studying him. "Indications of pat-

tern q34a tainted with ie27-6 modified by choline left branch isomorph g4r3 which is recessive and therefore coincident with the dominant allied g4r16 positive as an isolated atavismic right branch schippod."

"What does that mean in plain English?" Lefty asked.

"I'm wondering . . ." Huat mused. "It would be quite amusing if — but never mind. So you've never seen the inside of a spaceship? Mine isn't much."

Lefty followed Huat eagerly to the approximate spot where the butterfly had vanished.

"Here we are," Huat said. "After you."

Lefty gulped and stepped forward. Immediately the pleasant landscape of the state hospital grounds was replaced by a large room, circular in shape, and filled with panels containing all kinds of instruments. He was only half aware of Huat appearing beside him as he stepped forward slowly into the strange room.

Something moving caught his eye. It was the yellow butterfly.

"Gee!" he said. "A real spaceship."

"Of course," Huat said. "But don't distract me. I must further evaluate your gene complex. There's been a horrible blunder somewhere along the line here on earth. I can't understand it at all. All the careful instructions — and none of them followed, apparently."

"What instructions?" Lefty asked.

"Don't distract me," Huat said. "I didn't come prepared for this eventuality, but fortunately I have plenty of supplies. I can quickly alter the data termini of the autopilot. A nuclear dwell spectrum should be the quickest means . . ."

Twenty fascinating minutes later Lefty sumitted to the business end of a strange cone shaped device. Aside from a tingling feeling directly in front of its rounded point as it traveled here and there, hovering an inch or so away from direct contact, there was no sensation.

Finally Huat shut off the machine. From behind several of the wall panels came humming sounds and varicolored flashes of light. Abruptly these were replaced by a loud whirring sound, and a white card, postcard size, shot out from a slit. Huat, who had been expecting it, deftly caught it.

Lefty studied the strange markings on it over Huat's shoulder.

"Say. That don't look like any kind of writing I ever saw before," he remarked.

"Of course not," Huat said. "It's Venusian cuneiform script."

"I won't bite on that one," Lefty said.

Huat looked at him queerly. "Let me concentrate a moment," he said. He turned his attention back to the card. A moment later he pressed a button on the nearest panel. A blank card shot out. From somewhere among the folds of his spacious yellow robe he extracted a golden pencil.

His fingers moved swiftly, expertly.

"Tell me," he said. "Do you have a creature even vaguely resembling this picture in appearance?"

Lefty whistled. "Are you kidding?" he snorted. "That's Marge Afton, the switchboard girl in the administration building!"

"Then this creature exists?" Huat said, greatly surprised.

"She makes enough salary to do a little more than exist," Lefty said.

"Good," Huat said. "You understand, of course, that I constructed her by dead reckoning from your own gene complex. She is the exact outward design of the theoretical creature whose gene complex administers the first corrective reshuffling toward race recapture."

The Venusian smiled at Lefty absentmindedly. "This is going to be a long and tedious job. I may have to stay here for several thousand years before the job of returning the race to its norm is accomplished." He stuck the card and pencil inside his robe. "Bring

her here," he said matter-of-factly. "I must explain to you two what you must do. This is going to be anarchic to a certain extent, but we must step outside the normal reproductive function of the laboratory."

"You want me to bring her here?" Lefty said. "O.K., I'll try. Maybe she won't come though."

"She will," Huat said positively. "You say she answers to the name Marge Afton?"

HI MARGE," Lefty said, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Why hello, Lefty," Marge said, her voice, naturally rich and throaty, made even richer by its Brooklynese flavoring of individual syllables. "Been weeding the geraniums?"

"Yeah," he answered vaguely. "That is, among other things."

"What other things?" Marge asked, her eyes round and questioning, her red lips slightly parted in a way that made Lefty turn his eyes hastily away.

"Oh," he said, studying a picture on the wall, "this and that."

"Go on," Marge laughed. "You've got something you want to show me. I can tell. What is it?"

"I can't tell you," Lefty said. He glanced at the woman at the reception desk a few feet away and lowered his voice. "Look, Marge — you got a few minutes during lunch time? I want to show you something that's out of this world. No kidding! It's down on the south lawn near the beds I've been weeding."

"What is it?" she coaxed.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he hedged. "Seeing's believing, you know — and it'll only take a minute."

" Well . . . " Marge hesitated. She glanced at the large electric wall clock. "All right. Wait a minute."

She jabbed a telephone plug into the switchboard and jiggled a toggle.

"Hello?" she said. "Who's this talking? . . . Well, listen. Give me a report on Lefty Baker . . . Oh. He's been O.K. lately. For the last two weeks . . . ever since he tried to get the hospital to write to the publishing company that handles Shakespeare's works demanding a cut on the royalties until he got back what he loaned the author? What was wrong with that? I know for a fact he loaned him the money . . . he wants me to go walking with him. Wants to show me something, he says. I just wanted to know if he's dangerous . . . O.K., but I'm disappointed. It gets dull around here. Ha ha! Thank you." She yanked the plug loose and smiled at Lefty. "Wait for me outside. I'll be going to lunch in a couple of minutes." Her manner was so disarming that he swallowed the protests he was about to make over her phone call.

Five minutes later Lefty was leading the way across the lawn, stealing glances at Marge who walked along, head held high, nostrils sniffing delicately at the springtime air.

"Don't tell me what you want to show me is over in those lilac bushes," Marge said, smiling archly.

"Oh no," Lefty said. "It's right here ahead of us in the middle of the lawn. Here we are now."

He stopped and squinted at the lawn. Marge looked at him, then searched the lawn.

"Maybe it crawled under something," she said helpfully. "What'd it look like?"

"No no," Lefty said. "It wasn't a bug. I marked the spot with my toe so I could find it again."

"A four leaf clover?" Marge suggested.

"Uh uh. It's a spaceship. An invisible one."

"Say, I just remembered," Marge said hastily. "I promised Ethel I'd have lunch with her. She'll be waiting for me."

"Here it is!" Lefty said triumph-

antly. "See that mark I made?"

She stared where he pointed. There was a faint but definite line in the grass where a heavy toe had dragged along.

"Now," Lefty said. "Just step over that mark. Don't be afraid. Nothing's going to hurt you."

"But I really have to be going," Marge said weakly, hesitating between an urge to run and a desire not to hurt Lefty's feelings. "Well, O.K., just this once, then I must go."

She toed the line, took a deep breath, and stepped forward, vanishing. Lefty followed her and collided with her as she was stepping backward in surprise. They both fell to the floor of the circular room.

"Well, well," Huat said, rising from a chair where he had been sitting reading. "I see she came. How do you do, Marge? Lefty has told me about you." His eyes went expertly over her figure. "Wonderful," he purred. "Wonderful. Perfectly constructed for the purpose. You are indeed fortunate."

He bowed and took her hand, assisting her to her feet.

"My name is Huat," he said. He glanced at Lefty and added, "Aitch you ay tee."

Marge watched his face with round eyes as she rose to her feet.

"You weren't dreaming, Lefty," she said, laughing nervously and glancing at him, then looking around the room with awe-filled eyes. "And invisible, too. Gee!" She looked at Huat with frank admiration. "How do you do it?"

"It's nothing," Huat said. "I'm really ashamed of it. An older model. But did Lefty tell you why he brought you here?"

"Yeah," Marge said. "He wanted to show me something."

"It's much much more than that," Huat said warmly. "Much more. Come over here."

He led her gallantly to the interior of the ship.

"You see," Huat said, moving the cone of the nuclear dwell spectroscopic analyzer in front of her. "thousands of years ago the earth had no human race on it. On Venus we saw that it was a good planet, capable of supporting human life. The problem of getting human beings across the void between the planets was very great, though. At that time we had no inkling of the principle of hyperreciprointroreprojection and had to rely on the now antiquated principle of — I see that you call it rocket propulsion. We were faced with the problem of transporting full grown people across the millions of miles of interplanetary space.

"It was solved finally by a system of inbreeding. The first and only emigrants from Venus to Earth bore no resemblance to their parent race. They were quite small, weighing only a few pounds. In that way a great number of them were able to go in the one ship. With them they took instructions on the system of crossbreeding necessary to return them to the original strain."

"No kidding!" Marge said encouragingly, lifting her eyebrows at Lefty. "Well, I have to go now, Mr. Huat. It was nice meeting you. Where did you buy that robe you're wearing? I'd like to get some of the same material for a dress. How do you get out of this place? I really must be going."

"Hold still," Huat said sharply. "I'll be through with the analysis in another moment. Ah, now it's finished."

He took away the cone shaped analyzer. The clickings and varicolored flashes began behind the instrument panels. They stopped, the whirring started, and in short order the white card shot out.

"Just sit down over there, Marge," he said as he caught the card.

MARGE looked from Lefty's complacent face to Huat's abstracted one and slowly sat down.

"Mm-hmm," Huat murmured. "Just as I calculated. One slight abberant in

the irz44u321 gene just off the third sector from the major axis. That can be corrected by a non-isotopic diet during the initial stages."

"Diet?" Marge said, in a dismayed tone. "But I don't want to go on a diet." A stubborn light appeared in her eyes. "I won't."

"Not you, my dear," Huat said. "The baby."

"The what?" Marge said.

"Any explanation would be rather involved," Huat said. "I assure you the whole thing will be quite painless. It can all be done right here —"

"I'm very sorry," Marge said coldly. "In the first place I haven't the time, and in the second place if you're saying what I seem to gather you're saying — *well!*" She lifted her head indignantly and started toward the spot where she had entered the room.

"Wait!" Huat said, his tones quiet but commanding. "You undoubtedly don't understand the importance of this. The future of mankind —"

When he saw that she intended to keep going he whipped his hand into the depths of his yellow robe and brought out a small red object. Although nothing visible emanated from it Marge suddenly stiffened.

"Catch her!" Huat ordered.

Without thinking, Lefty sprang to catch her — and felt a tingling paralysis grip his every muscle . . .

* * *

Lefty stared blankly at the quilted pattern of the ceiling over his head, wondering why they also padded the ceiling of his cell. From wondering about that he switched to wondering what he had done to get put in a padded cell. Maybe they were right . . . maybe he really was crazy . . . he couldn't remember . . .

Memory returned explosively in his mind, but the explosive physical reaction to it was as violent as that of an ignited wet firecracker. His violent effort to leap up out of bed resulted in his head lifting a feeble inch. It became tired immediately. He let it sink back.

He turned his head sideways. Marge was lying on another cot across the room. This wasn't the room with all the instruments in it . . .

He woke up again and forced himself to concentrate. Where was Huat? Lefty turned his head the other way. A padded wall. Huat wasn't in the room.

Exerting every ounce of will he possessed, Lefty forced himself to a sitting position. Every muscle sent his mind a pleading message that it was exhausted. A message that had to be overruled.

"Got to get help," he muttered. "Got to get help. Haut's a madman."

He dragged himself painfully to his feet. Standing there, swaying dizzily, he suddenly became aware of familiar looking overalls and shirt lying on a chair. He looked down at himself and saw he was dressed in something resembling a hospital bed gown.

"Can't go for help like this," he mumbled.

Eternities later he was dressed. While dressing he watched Marge. She was either sound asleep, or — paralyzed. A similar gown showed above the sheet that covered her. And her clothes were similarly piled on a chair.

"Got to get help," he mumbled. "But who'd believe me? Got to prove it somehow. Evidence . . ."

Inspiration struck.

"That's it!" he mumbled thickly. "Her dress."

Staggering under his own weight he went to the chair and picked up Marge's dress, folded it compactly, and stuck it under his arm.

There was a door. He headed toward it, constantly correcting his direction of travel and eventually arriving at it. He opened it. On the other side was the circular room with its instrument pan-

els. He staggered across it toward the spot where he knew he could step across into the world of bright skies and green grass.

And still Huat couldn't be seen.

"Maybe it got him too," Lefty mumbled. "Serve him right!"

He was at the right spot on the floor of the room to step out. He took the step forward. An invisible force held him back. He pushed against it.

SUDDENLY a shrill alarm bell began ringing. He looked around and saw a red light appear on a nearby panel. The pointer on some kind of meter was dropping rapidly toward the zero mark. It reached it. Abruptly the resisting force that held Lefty vanished. He had been unconsciously leaning into it. Now he felt himself shoot forward, stumble, and as he fell to the lawn the strange paralysis that had frozen his muscles vanished.

He shook his head to clear his vision. Marge's dress had fallen from his arm grip. He scooped it up as he got up. It came unfolded. He shook it out and started to fold it again neatly.

"There he is!" a voice shouted excitedly.

"Stand still, Lefty, or we'll shoot to kill!" another bellowed.

Lefty looked up from his preoccupation with Marge's dress. At first glance it seemed that there must be a thousand blue uniformed police spread over the hospital grounds. And every one of them had some sort of gun.

"Thank God!" Lefty said happily to the grim-faced, submachine gun armed policeman who reached him first. "I thought I was going to have to hunt for help. We've got to rescue Marge from Huat."

"Gimme that," the policeman said, pointing at Marge's dress which dangled in disorder from Lefty's hand.

When he handed it over the policeman held it up, his eyes becoming cold slits in his mask of a face.

"Where is she?" he barked.

"Right in there," Lefty said, pointing in the direction from which he had come in leaving the spaceship.

The policeman blinked at the empty air. "Is she still alive?"

"Of course," Lefty said. "But she's unconscious, I guess. Huat paralyzed her."

"Careful!" the policeman warned the others coming up. "He's irrational."

"I'm not either!" Lefty said, growing uneasy as the ring of grim faces about him grew more dense. "Haut's got Marge captive in his spaceship. He had me too but I got away. It was all I could do to move, or I would have brought Marge with me. I came to get help." He looked pleadingly at the ring of faces. "Huat's from Venus," he said. "Look. I'll prove it to you. Watch. I'm not going to try to get away. Just watch me."

He turned around, walked slowly forward searching the lawn until he found the faint line he had dug with his toe.

"Now watch," he said triumphantly. "This'll prove everything."

As no one made a move to stop him he boldly took one long step forward across the line.

He was still standing on the lawn. He blinked his eyes.

"That's funny," he said weakly. "I shouldn't be here." Full realization of what that meant struck him. "Oh my God!" he shouted. "Huat's done something to keep me out. Huat's got Marge and there's no way of rescuing her. We've got to do something. But —" He frowned in puzzlement. "— what?"

"Let us through," a familiar voice said.

The ring of policemen parted. Two hospital attendants came through.

"Hello, Lefty," one of them said. "Remember me? I'm your pal Orville. And this is your other pal Fred."

"Don't be silly," Lefty said in annoyance. "Of course I remember you. Explain to these policemen that I'm all

right. *You* know I'm not a nut like the rest. We've got to rescue Marge from Huat before something happens to her."

"Sure, Lefty," Orville said soothingly. "We'll rescue Marge. But we have to leave that to the police. They'll take care of it."

As he talked, he and Fred moved to either side of Lefty. Suddenly they pounced. A straitjacket seemed to materialize out of thin air. Before Lefty could protest effectively he found his arms securely wrapped around him and encased in snug fitting canvas sleeves.

"But they can't rescue her," Lefty said, sobbing in anger and frustration. "They don't know where to look."

"Oh?" Orville said, his face brightening. "Do you know? Will you tell us?"

"I tried to," Lefty said, "but they don't believe me. It's right here, in an invisible spaceship from Venus . . ."

He saw the disbelief, the disappointment, in their faces. It angered him.

"You fools!" he shouted. "You blasted fools. Don't you realize Huat's crazy?"

"Take him away quick," one of the policemen said grimly. "Crazy or not, I'm tempted to shoot him." He was looking at Marge's dress dangling in the hand of the one Lefty had given it to.

"You idiots!" Lefty said. But Orville and Fred were rushing him toward the hospital buildings. And someone was saying, "Fan out and search every square foot. Her body must me somewhere not too far away."

UTTER despair possessed Lefty. Directly in front of him was a blank wall. That is, it was blank until you began noticing its small details of interlacing cracks, roughness, and the shape of its normally unnoticeable color unevennesses.

On either side of him were men in straitjackets, strapped securely into straight-backed chairs just as he was. Unable to move. Able only to sit and stare at the wall, and to talk to oneself as the one to Lefty's right was doing, sing dejectedly as the man to his left was doing, or suffer the torture of one's thoughts in silence as he himself was doing.

Full realization of the effect his desperately hasty attempt to get help had had on the police and the attendants had come, each tumbler clicking into place like a key turning in a lock, closing all avenues of hope. Marge's dress, that he had taken as proof that she was in trouble, had been interpreted in a monstrous light. His attempts at explanation had sounded like unintelligible gibberish because of the unfortunate similarity of the Venusian's name and a common word. Even his attempt to get back in the spaceship as he saw it now in retrospect was a horribly damning little act that had added convincing evidence to his apparent delusions.

He chuckled without humor, then stopped abruptly, knowing that even this innocent sound to an observer would be interpreted as madness.

It was hopeless. Even if by some miracle he had been able to convince anyone of Marge's plight, getting to her without Huat's opening of the way again would be impossible. And so Lefty let utter despair seep into the very core of his soul.

"Shhhh!"

Lefty heard the hissing sound but attached no importance to it until he felt hands touching him. Startled, he jerked his head around. The familiar face of Huat and his yellow robed figure etched their way into his numbed consciousness.

"Quiet," Huat whispered. "I'll have you loose in a second."

Lefty could do no more than stare blankly. It was too sudden a change. His mind was too numbed by hopelessness to respond at once. His arms, freed from the straitjacket, dropped to his

lap. Huat went on to the straps, unbuckling them. Then he helped Lefty stand up.

"Come, Lefty," he said, holding him steady while he moved one foot after the other clumsily. "The entrance to the ship is right here. I moved it when Marge told me where you'd be."

"Then Marge is all right?" Lefty asked.

"Of course," Huat said. "And anxiously waiting for you in the ship."

"Wait!" Lefty said. He stopped and turned around. The straitjacket was lying on the floor where Huat had flung it. A slow grin crept onto his face. "O. K., let's go."

LEFTY turned back again and took a slow step with Huat's help. The interior of the spaceship materialized around him, but he wasn't aware of that. His whole attention was centered on Marge, a Marge dressed in a slip that revealed generous lengths of shapely leg and femininely curved shoulders. But even these were only a background of impression as Lefty looked into her eyes and saw the light of happiness that shone there.

"Lefty!" Marge said, and sprang into his arms, holding him up and kissing him happily as his knees gave way under him.

"What's come over you, Marge?" he finally managed to gasp. "I like it. I thing it's swell. But — you never showed any real signs of acting like this before."

"Isn't it wonderful?" Marge said. "We're the father and mother of the future race! Imagine. You and me!"

"That should do it," Huat said. "I've moved down the road from the grounds. You can slip out without anyone seeing you."

"But — but — but —" Lefty sputtered, not hearing Huat. "We'd better get married then, hadn't we?"

"Are you proposing to me?" Marge asked.

"Well, gee — sure!" Lefty said. "It's the only thing to do now, isn't it? Not that I wouldn't anyway." He gulped and wisely stopped talking.

Marge seemed to be studying him speculatively.

"Maybe I'll accept," she said. "We have so much in common, now." She giggled and added, "All the babies."

"*All* the babies?" Lefty echoed weakly.

"Yes," Huat's voice impinged on Lefty's dazed mind. He looked at Huat. The man was beaming happily. "And if you and Marge wish, I'll give you as many of them as you can take care of."

"*You'll what!*" Lefty said, glaring.

"Oh, Lefty," Marge giggled. The giggles broke into laughter. She controled it with effort and gasped, "You don't understand. They're ours, but they're test tube babies."

For a minute Lefty had the horrible sensation of plowing through cobwebs. Then he heard the Venusian's voice again.

"Of course," Huat said. "Come and see them. You'll have to take into account the fact that they're in a stasis field with a time rate different than ours out here. I wanted to make as many as possible on short order and distribute them all over the world. You could go in if I'd had time to build a stasis lock, but at least you can see them. Rather blurred, aren't they?"

Lefty was gaping through the small peephole into the section of the ship where Huat had set up his baby factory. There were vats in which things vaguely resembling babies were growing. There were robots shaped roughly like people taking care of actual babies. But it was all jerky and incredibly rapid, like a movie being run too fast.

"It was a fascinating problem," Huat explained. "To figure out the corrective gene pattern that would return the race to the norm. According to my calculations if I manufacture fifty million of them and distribute them evenly, in a

little over four thousand years it will be accomplished automatically."

"Look at that one," Marge cooed. "Isn't it a darling."

"Uh huh," Lefty agreed, acutely conscious that she had moved close to him, her head against his so that she could see through the small opening.

"Mr. Huat!" Marge said excitedly. "Can we have that one?"

"Let's see," Huat said. "Well . . . I guess it will be all right. I'll shut off the stasis field and get it for you."

Marge chuckled deliciously when he brought it out and handed it over to her. She looked up intimately at Lefty. "Just think, darling. All our very own. "Let's go. I can hardly wait to get it home — which reminds me, we'll have to get married right away and you'll have to get a job and — and — all sorts of things. Come on!"

SHE GRABBED his hand and pulled, going toward the place where they could leave the ship. She paused there and turned around.

"Good bye Mr. Huat," she sang. "Lot's of luck with your problem."

Lefty turned to smile at Huat, felt a jerk at his hand, and found himself beside the highway leading to town, a brief quarter of a mile from the corner of the hospital grounds, the spaceship gone. "I think the bus stop's just a little ways ahead," Marge said, still gripping Lefty's hand as she started ahead, firmly holding the baby against her with the other.

"There she is!" a voice shouted. Lefty jerked his head in the direction of the sound in time to see the policeman point his gun upward and fire a shot.

"Oh dear," Marge said. "And me with only a slip on. What *became* of my dress, anyway?"

The police were erupting from both sides of the road with the thunder of crashing bushes signalling the approach of still others. In seconds they formed a tight ring around Lefty and Marge and the baby.

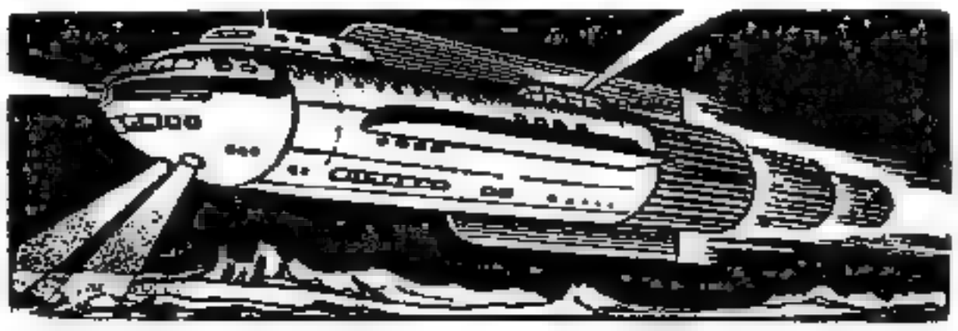
"How'd you get here?" one of them said to Lefty. "I thought they had you tied up in a straitjacket under close guard."

"Now wait a minute," Lefty said. "I can explain everything."

The policeman looked from Lefty to Marge to the baby.

"Go ahead," he sneered.

"Well —" Lefty began. He looked around at the circle of cold expressionless faces. "It's like this . . ." he went on doggedly.



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. . . and a little child led them . . . into horror!

Somewhere, she knew, the aliens were preparing

In Sheep's Clothing

By Alan E. Nourse

SHE came into St. Christopher's Maternity Hospital late one afternoon, her thin cheeks pinched, huge brown eyes tired and wistful. Sighing gratefully, she sank into the chair beside the reception desk, a small, hollow-eyed creature, and gave the nurse her name and address, and tried her best to smile as she signed the register with thin, trembling fingers.

"It isn't anything, really," she faltered, trying to hide the pain deep in her eyes. "It's just that it's the first time, and my husband's been away for so long—I haven't been able to eat very much. That's probably what's wrong."

She looked up at the nurse, her eyes fever-bright. "If you can just let me rest a while—"

Soon she was in bed, a small, cozy room near the end of the right wing, where she could look out on the cool, parklike terrace of the hospital grounds, and listen to the locusts buzz. Almost immediately she was asleep, until later in the evening, when the two doctors came into the darkened room to see her. There was Doctor Paul Frank, tall and slender, carrying perpetually the rich, genial aroma of his old briar, his greying hair slightly rumpled, a grave smile of understanding in his cool, wide-set eyes, and Doctor Tuckman, younger, conducting the examination with the cool, machinelike precision of a highly specialized tool, quick, sure, untempered by the years of experience and compassion the older man knew. Dr. Frank watched his young colleague, and took the woman's thin hand in his own strong brown one, smiling. "It won't be long now," he said. "Soon we'll have you on your feet and eating again."

"I wish I could see my husband," she said weakly, her soft eyes wide. "Sometimes I'm so—so frightened."

"It's always frightening, the first time," said Dr. Frank easily. "You don't have to worry now: let us worry. And perhaps we could call your husband, if you like—Peter Cantrella, you said?"

She nodded, her eyes wide with concern. "But you mustn't call him or tell him anything," she added quickly. "He's very busy—and so far away. His contract with Venusport mines won't be finished for another eight months, and he couldn't possibly get back before—"

Dr. Frank turned to the younger man inquiringly. "How about it, Tuck?"

DR. TUCKMAN shook his head, perplexed. "Can't see anything but malnutrition." He glanced severely at the woman's peaked face. "She hasn't eaten anything for well over a week, but there seems to be no complication—" He drew the blanket precisely to the woman's chin, giving her a cool, disinterested smile. "Tomorrow we'll give you a lab rundown. Perhaps that'll put the finger on the difficulty."

"I hope there won't be any trouble," said the woman tiredly. "Peter blasted on the STAR KING just six months ago. He'd feel terrible if anything went wrong and he wasn't here—"

"Nothing will go wrong," said the older doctor easily, snapping out the bed lamp. He nodded to her, a quick, warm smile, and stepped out into the corridor, frowning to himself.

"—a very odd case," Dr. Tuckman was saying briskly. "She just hasn't eaten! The pregnancy seems to be normal enough, but you *saw* her—so thin and weak, with hollows in her cheeks, and she's running a fever. If we don't do somehing very soon, she's not going to survive."

Dr. Frank nodded absently. "It's very odd," he agreed softly. "But something else is odd, too. Most peculiar, that woman. Didn't you sense it?" He looked at the younger man, then frowned. "I don't suppose you would have. Hardly more than a girl, too, and her husband—"

"—probably went to Venus to be rid of her," said Tuckman sourly. "That's getting to be an old story these days—"

Dr. Frank shook his head. "Not that," he said. "It was something she said that bothers me, maybe the way she looked at me. Can't quite put my finger on it—" He smiled then, turning to the younger man. "You handle the examination, and keep me posted on developments." He grinned sheepishly and scratched his head. "I'll think of what bothered me about that woman. Maybe tomorrow—"

She was lying quietly in bed when Dr. Frank entered the next morning, and her drawn face brightened visibly as she recognized him. "Good morning, Doctor," she said with a wan smile.

"Good morning, Mary." Dr. Frank smiled gravely as he reached by habit for her pulse. She was such a frail little thing, he thought ruefully, her thin face so sallow, her eyes bottomless

brown pools. Suddenly he felt his heart going out to her, almost changed his mind about asking her the questions this morning—"How's it going?" he asked as he noted down her pulse on the chart.

She smiled thinly. "Pretty good, I guess. But he's sure lively."

He looked at her quizzically. "Kick you?"

"I think he turned clear over, or something." She took a deep breath, staring happily out the window. "It can't be too long, now, I guess. I *do* wish Peter were here—he'd be so proud."

Dr. Frank frowned, uneasy again. "Oh, yes," he said. "Peter. Where did you say Peter was?"

She looked up at him with wide, trusting eyes. "Why, Doctor," she said. "I thought I told you yesterday. Peter shipped off on the STAR KING just eight months ago, for Venus." She smiled forlornly, her pinched cheeks taking on the faintest tinge of color. "We'd only been married for a short time, you know, and then he got this appointment with the mining company, and left. He didn't even know about the baby—"

Dr. Frank shifted his weight and coughed to interrupt her. "Mary," he said softly. "Yesterday you said he left *six* months ago. Where did you say you and Peter lived?"

She smiled indulgently. "You *do* have a bad memory, don't you? Like I said, we lived in Bridgeport before he left. We were married in New York, and honeymooned up on the sweetest little lake in Ontario—"

"Mary." His voice was gentle, his eyes sought hers gravely. "You must tell me the truth now, Mary. There's no use keeping up this story. We don't really care, ourselves, but the hospital records must be accurate, both for you and the baby. Why don't you tell me?"

A little frown creased her white forehead, and she blinked confusedly. "I—I don't know what you mean. I told you, Peter—"

"There isn't any Peter." His voice was sharp, suddenly irritated. "We checked the information you gave us when you registered. It wasn't true, Mary—not a word of it. Your name is Dana—Mary Dana—not Mary Cantrella. You were born in Forest Grove, Oregon, and you went to school in Spokane. You've never been married, and you came to this hospital directly from a job in Chicago, not from a honeymoon in Ontario—"

SHE was laughing, a little uncertainly, her dark eyes probing the doctor's face, her head shaking in disbelief. "You're joking, aren't you, Doctor? Peter shipped off to Venus on the STAR KING eight months ago. I saw him, I saw him go aboard, and I saw the ship raise up and disappear into the sky."

Dr. Frank shook his head sadly. "No, Mary. That isn't true. I know it isn't true. I knew it last night, though I wasn't sure, because I had just recently read about the STAR KING. I checked. It's sitting in Catskill Rocketport right now, still undergoing repairs. You see, it hasn't been to Venus in three years—"

She stared at him for a long moment, an unnerving stare, a stare that began to frighten him, make him try to shift his eyes away from hers, to turn away from her. Quite suddenly the depth and warmth were gone from the woman's eyes, and they were bleak eyes, cold and barren, frozen eyes. Dr. Frank stood rigid, chilled by the sudden change as the woman shrank away from him on the bed as though he were some vile, poisonous thing, staring at him, the bitter coldness of frozen hatred charging from her eyes, an animal coldness—"It's true, what I told you," she spat. "All true." Even her voice was harsh and brittle. "It's true, I tell you. You can't fool me. I know what you want. You—you want to hurt my baby, that's it, you want to hurt it, you want to kill my baby, take him away from me—" Her voice rose, harsh and grating on the doctor's ears as he watched

her in alarm. "Well, you can't! You *mustn't hart my baby!*"

Dr. Frank slapped her cheek sharply, his hand trembling. "Stop it!" he snapped. "No one's going to hurt your baby. You're safe here. We're trying to help you—"

The bleakness left her eyes then, the animal fury, the hostile desolation, all melted away quickly as they had risen, and she relaxed, trembling, managing a wan smile. "I'm sorry," she said, and began to sob. "I'm sorry. Somtimes I'm so afraid—oh, if Peter could only be here!"

Dr. Frank patted her hand, gently, his mind still jolted by the frozen hatred in those eyes. He stepped into the hall, closing the door carefully, and walked to the desk telephone. "Tuckman," he said quickly when he was connected. "Get a psych on that woman while you're examining her. Electroencephalgraph and all. Get the whole picture—"

"What's the trouble, Paul?" Tuckman's voice was brittle, metallic over the wire.

Dr. Frank bit his lip, thoughtfully, suddenly ashamed of his alarm. "I don't know," he said finally. "It's just that—oh, I can't pin it down. She just gave me a funny sort of a scare." He rubbed his nose perplexedly. "I think there's more here than we can see."

Three hours later the telephone jangled in Paul Frank's office. He lifted the receiver, heard Dr. Tuckman's voice, tense and breathless. "Paul! I'm down in EEG with that Dana woman. Can you come down a minute?"

Dr. Frank felt a tightness creep into his throat. "What's the trouble?"

The young doctor's voice was trembling. "I—I don't know. I can't explain it, Paul, but I want you to see this for yourself—"

Dr. Frank set down the telephone and hurried into the corridor, struggling into his clinical coat as he went. The elevator was stalled on another floor, so he ducked down the stairs, taking them two at a time, through the corridors of the quiet hospital to the cool first-story psychology wing that held the electroencephalograph. Dr. Tuckman was pacing the corridor, his young face drawn tight, sucking nervously on a cigarette. The man's professional sureness was gone, the cool objectivity vanished, and he looked up at Paul Frank like a frightened child, his eyes imploring. "I'm losing my grip, Paul," he muttered as the older doctor joined him. "I've got to get out of here—"

DR. FRANK glanced through the open door into one of the quiet rooms, where the woman lay on a cot, breathing softly, her eyes closed. A young nurse stood nearby, watching her with wide eyes. Dr. Frank stuffed his briar carefully, watching the younger man with troubled eyes. "Get hold of yourself, Tuck," he said easily. "Have you examined her?"

"I've—I've started to. Got the clinical lab reports, and then I started on the psych—Paul, I'm scared. That woman—there's something here that I don't know how to handle—"

Dr. Frank forced his voice to be cool. "What were the lab reports?"

"Way out of line. We did a complete routine: a blood chemistry rundown, a hematology check, a serology check—that's why she's sick. A sort of serum-sickness, really. Her protein metabolism is all upset, way off balance. It looks as though she had been given a huge dose of horse serum, or something. But the psych—" Dr. Tuckman broke off, his face white. "We started the usual routine—conference, amytal analysis, induced relaxation analysis, finally Scop. She's under Scop now, and I don't know what to do—she's got a hole in her memory big enough to throw a cat through, with some sort of crazy memory patchwork pasted over it, an incredibly crude job, considering the sort of thing that is. The job showed remarkable technical skill, just no insight at all into the working of the human mind." He snubbed his cigarette with trembling fingers. "And when I tried to disturb that patchwork—"

Dr. Frank walked over to the woman, nodding a brief dismissal to the nurse, who retired to the end of the room. Dr. Frank took the woman's pulse. "How long ago did she have the Scop?" he asked quietly.

"About half an hour—"

Carefully Dr. Frank prepared a fresh syringe of the drug, gently found an exposed vein in the woman's arm. Momentarily she blinked, her eyes open, and glanced imploringly at the older man; then her respiration slowed, and the eyes closed again wearily.

"Just relax," said Dr. Frank softly. "We don't want to hurt you, Mary. We just want to ask some questions."

Her head shook back and forth, feebly, as though she were trying to throw off some horrible dream. A small cry came from her lips, and she muttered aimlessly as the drug took deeper effect.

"Mary Dana," said Dr. Frank gently. "Who told you that you were married to Peter?"

She breathed softly for a moment, dampness appearing on her feverish forehead. "The Rocketport," she muttered. "Peter's going away—I saw him —saw him go, and walk into the ship—the jets are starting—" She breathed more quickly, her chest moving up and down in uneven rhythm— "He's going —he won't be back for so long—so long —Peter! he's—he's gone—the ship's going up—"

"Mary!"

She caught her breath, and her body stiffened. A vein appeared on Paul Frank's forehead as he watched her. "Mary! *Who told you that?*"

"It's—nobody—it's true—"

"Who told you that?"

The girl began to cry, great jerking sobs that echoed in the darkened room. "I don't know, I don't know —"

"You do know. You must tell me, you *must*—"

"Peter—"

"Not Peter, someone else. *You must tell me!*"

Suddenly her eyes were open, staring straight into his, pleading. "They came," she groaned, her voice barely audible through her heavy breathing. "They took me—it was so dark, so very dark—and I was so happy, they *made* me happy—yes, yes, I was so happy, and they took me—" Stark fear appeared in her eyes, and she gasped. "Don't—don't make me tell — oh, please, please—"

"You *must tell me*—"

THE fear in her eyes widened, bordered on madness. "Please, I can't —you mustn't make me—I—they took me, they—no, it was Peter, *Peter!* We were married, I love him—"

"You must tell me, Mary—"

"They took me—" Suddenly her face contorted in racking pain, and she screamed, a forced, urgent scream, wrenching through the air of the room, again and again as she twisted on the bed, her muscles fighting one another, eyes glazed, lips twisted in agony as she screamed. . . .

Swiftly Dr. Frank reached for another syringe, drove the needle into her arm, carefully injecting the morphine, and waited, trembling, as the screams subsided into jerking sobs. Her muscles began relaxing, and in a few moments she sank into a comatose sleep, her breathing coming more slowly, more regularly. Then the older man turned to Dr. Tuckman, and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "I see what you mean," he said, and his voice shook.

Tuckman lit a cigarette with trembling fingers. "What do you think?"

"She's been tampered with. There's no doubt. That was pain we saw, sharp, agonizing pain. She's been tampered with, and she can't tell us how or by whom."

"But surely there's some way—"

Dr. Frank nodded, staring at the woman. "Yes, there's a way. She's got a brain. Somebody's controlling what she does with it, but nobody can control what it does with her. The pain is in her mind, and the secret too. We'll take a look at her mind."

Click, went the drum as it slowly revolved. Click, click.

The woman lay very still, breathing shallowly, her eyelids closed, her face so pale it seemed like blue-lined Dresden china. Beside the cot, Dr. Tuckman worked preparing the connections for the electroencephalograph, working with some vestige of his habitual coolness and precision.

Click, click, click.

"Ready?" asked Dr. Frank. His voice sounded harsh in the silent room. Dr. Tuckman nodded, checking the attachments to the woman's temples, behind her ears. Then he said, "Ready."

Dr. Frank flipped a switch. Gently the needle eased down to the sensitized metallic foil on the revolving drum, ever so gently began its magnetic inscription. Like a dainty steel finger, the needle traced its line of activated electrons, painting its strange course on the foil. The room was silent and oppressive, the stillness punctuated sharply by the click, click of the drum, by the shallow watchful breathing of the two doctors. Paul Frank watched, and breathed, and felt the icy tendrils of fear creep deep into his brain as he watched—

It was a wild graph. An incredible graph, impossible, frantic. The drum went click, click, and the seconds ticked off in resonance, and the incredible graph lengthened, and lengthened. Dr. Frank turned his eyes to the younger man, met his squarely, and saw his fear reflected; he looked away quickly, back to the woman and the graph, feeling the rising horror.

Click, click. Another inch of foil rolled from the slot, and another. Then Dr. Tuckman was shaking his head, his hands trembling, almost giggling. "No, no—this is impossible. I've never seen anything like this—"

"Wait," said Dr. Frank. His eyes were narrowed as he watched the thin line on the foil.

"But it's impossible, insane, crazy," hissed Dr. Tuckman, his eyes wide with fear. "*Look* at it!"

Dr. Frank ripped off the strip of foil, snapped off the machine. Carefully, with shaking fingers, he walked to the light of the window, studied the curling paper. "Yes, incredible," he breathed. "I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it—but there's something wrong with it—"

"*Wrong* with it! It's insane—"

"No, no. There's a pattern." Dr. Frank glanced up at the younger man. "What happens when you put two and two together?"

Tuckman's voice was dull. "You get four—"

"Or else you get twenty-two. Depends on how you look at it. We're looking at this wrong—" Suddenly he was at the desk, paper and pencil in his hand. Carefully he traced the graph, studied it, checked and drew, his hand working with swift urgency. "We have to look at it a different way," he said very softly. "Like breaking it into components—"

"Components—"

Dr. Frank worked with his fingers on the paper. Then his eyes widened, and he sat up stiffly. "Of course it's wild, impossible," he whispered. "We aren't getting one graph at all. We're getting two. Hers, and *that baby's!*"

Dr. Tuckman's breath hissed sharply. "Are you trying to say that that baby's *thinking?*"

Dr. Frank stood up, stuffed his pipe bowl automatically. "Thinking! Lord, *how* it's thinking! Her graph is pretty normal, considering that she's still under the influence of Scop—a normal graph of a reasonably healthy mind. But the other—"

Dr. Tuckman took the papers, studied them for a long moment. "This is wild, monstrous," he said. He looked up at the older doctor with cold fear in his eyes. "Paul," he said. "This—this was never made by a human being—"

DR. PAUL FRANK drew nervously on his pipe, his mind racing. He felt the chill growing deep in his chest, and he fought it down angrily, tried to

keep his hand from shaking. He motioned the younger doctor into the small cool office next to the lab room, and carefully shut the door. "Then what else?" he asked, hoarsely.

Tuckman looked up, his eyes wide with fear. "I don't know. I can only guess."

"Then guess."

"It's an impossible guess. Her body is fighting a foreign protein. That's why she's sick, why she can't eat. It's not a mutation, nothing like that. If it were, the protein would be normal human protein, or the child would have died normally months ago. She's carrying something in her bloodstream that's foreign to humans. Look at that graph—"

Tuckman glanced warily at the door, and his voice lowered. "You saw it. The child she's carrying has a tight, organized thought pattern already, even before it's born. It's *thinking*, now, when no human baby *could* be thinking. And the pattern is foreign, totally alien. It couldn't be a human brain thinking." He took a wavering breath, his voice tight. "The child is alien. Planted there by some alien creature, growing there in a woman's body, growing and *thinking*—" He shuddered, his young face suddenly haggard. "It has to be killed, Paul," he whispered. "Now, while we can still do it, while we can control it. It has to be killed. That—that graph, Paul. I'm scared—"

Paul Frank stared at him. "Hold on a minute," he said softly. "Hold on. Think what you're saying—"

"There's no time to hold on!" Tuckman burst out. "There isn't time—we don't dare wait. It's *alien*, man—it's monstrous, and alien. We've *got* to kill it!"

"Why? Why kill it?" Dr. Frank leaned forward, his eyes suddenly bright. "Suppose you're right, Tuck. It's not impossible. There've been rumors—oh, for decades there have been rumors of alien spacecraft, alien creatures watching us. Suppose, somehow, Mary Dana was chosen by an alien race —by creatures from somewhere, some other world—and suppose, somehow, she's carrying an alien child. That's not impossible, either. Dogs have carried and delivered rabbit young implanted in them in embryonic form. Or suppose an actual hybrid was conceived—different species have mated before and borne hybrid young. Look at the mule, for instance, or the tigon. Suppose that were true? What would it mean?"

"It would mean a monster!" the young doctor snapped venomously. "An unthinkable, half-breed monster—"

The room was very silent. Out on the hospital lawn the locusts were beginning to buzz as darkness crept up, and a cool night breeze sifted in the window. A peaceful night, quiet, untroubled. Traffic on the avenue blocks away sent tiny sharp sounds to punctuate the stillness, and somewhere a baby cried.

"I don't understand you," said Dr. Frank, softly, breaking the silence. "You don't understand it, so you fear it. You can't conceive it in your mind, you can't penetrate and see, so you hate it. Why must it be a monster? Why must you be afraid? Suppose some race of creatures came from the stars, and hid themselves, and watched us here, maybe for years, studying us, studying our natures, our civilization. Suppose they were afraid to land, or to make themselves known, because they saw that human beings would hate them, and fear them, and try to kill them? Suppose they saw an insurmountable communications barrier that would make contact almost impossible. They could be good creatures, advanced, civilized in the true sense. Suppose they saw a possibility for a rich contact, and just didn't dare try to make it? What better way to establish first contact, what more logical, sensible way, than to send an agent, an emissary, to be born of a human mother, to grow up among human beings, half-human itself, learning, studying, beating open a path for peaceful contact—what better way?"

He sat back, trembling, staring at the younger doctor. "If we kill it, we could

be destroying our first contact with an alien race. We might drive them away for good. We could be destroying our first chance for real knowledge and understanding of the universe. We don't dare chance that, Tuck. Because if we destroyed it, we'd never know."

DR. TUCKMAN shook his head, his eyes still large. "But that graph, Paul, it was monstrous. There's no goodness in that thought pattern, no richness, no kindness—didn't you see it? Nothing but hatred, and anger, and a burning urge to be free. And there were other things you didn't see." Dr. Tuckman coughed, lit another smoke. "I experimented—before I called you down, while she was under Scop. I tried to worry her—purposely talked about destroying the child. You didn't see how the mother changed, how she twisted and fought and burned with rage—it controls her thoughts, Paul. Already. It isn't even born, and already it changes its mother's thoughts to fit its own—"

"Oh, nonsense. You aren't talking sense, Tuck. Of course she was afraid —any mother is afraid for her child. And what can you tell from lines on a graph?" Dr. Frank leaned forward excitedly. "Of course the thought patterns are different, alien. How can we try to interpret them? How can we tell if they're hateful, or angry? We've got to wait—wait until she delivers, until we can see the child, contact it—" His voice fell, softly. "After all, it's her first baby. Of course she's afraid. But there's no reason for us to fear—"

"There is, there is! If we wait, it'll be too late. There are laws, Paul. If something were to happen to the baby now, it would be a miscarriage, and nobody would be to blame. But after it's born—who would listen to us then? The doctors would laugh at us, the law would stop us—*we can't wait,* Paul—"

Dr. Paul Frank stood up with decision on his face. "I'm sorry, Tuck. But you're wrong."

Dr. Tuckman rose, his eyes haggard, and he turned to the older man. "I have to do what you say," he said dully. "You'll find out—you'll wish you'd listened. I don't want anything to do with it—" He turned away from the desk. "I don't even want to be around."

Dr. Frank sighed softly, and turned slowly to the window, shaking his head sadly. His voice was hardly audible. "I'm sorry, Tuck," he said.

DR. PAUL FRANK sat back at his desk in his office, and drew slowly on the weatherbeaten old briar, his gaze wandering out the window and into the silky darkness of the hospital grounds. The night was full of small sounds; far down the hall he heard the squall of a baby, the tinkle of a nurse's bell, the quiet, quick pit-pat of rubber soles on the marble corridor, the insistent click-ety-click-click of the summons-tapper, calling a sleepy interne down to the labor room, or to surgery or the delivery room. The hospital was quiet with a placid serenity as the doctor sat gazing out the window, his eyes vacant, his mind filled with a thousand wonderful thoughts.

A woman, and a baby. Such a simple combination, so basic, so staggeringly simple. Sleeping there in her room now, quietly, the fulcrum of man's progress since the dawn of time, and now—the perfect, simple, logical key to a new era—

He was sure his answer was the right one. All his life, all the meaning of his life, lay in the saving of life, the preservation of that mystical linkage between woman and child. And now, a new link, incredible, of unthinkable potentiality, the opening of a great door. Like a lightening spark from fingertip to fingertip, contact with another race, through a different sort of being—human and alien, a joining of the two, through the simplest, yet most wonderful means possible. An agent to draw two worlds together, somehow, to bring love, and richness, and understanding—and peace—

He drew on his pipe, placidly, and

other thoughts rose in his mind, sifting up from the depths of his brain like icy tendrils, seizing his mind, bringing in a chill of doubt—

Aliens. He turned the word over in his mind, savoring it, groping to catch hold of the fleeting icy fingers of thought. Aliens. Alien minds, alien thoughts. Love was human, understanding was human, compassion was *human*—

The chill deepened, spread through his mind, and his breathing quickened imperceptibly in the still night air. Just suppose—

Suppose Tuckman were right. He couldn't be, of course, but just *suppose*. Suppose the woman had been detected by mistake. Suppose that hadn't been in the bargain at all, suppose the aliens had wanted the woman to conceive, and carry, and deliver, unnoticed among many mothers, deliver a child so similar, so *very* like a human baby that its very strangeness would pass unnoticed. And suppose the child had power—unimaginable power, alien power; suppose it could turn men's minds to think the way it wanted them to, any way it chose, to see only what it wanted them to see. Suppose it were born, right here in the hospital, and went free in the world, growing to adulthood, controlling, twisting, distorting—a wolf, walking in sheep's clothing until it was ready, and the time was right, and it could bring others, to kill, ravage, destroy. Suppose it could send icy fingers into men's minds, turning their thoughts, so subtly they themselves couldn't tell, controlling them like marionettes—

Even before it was born!

Dr. Frank's forehead was damp, his fingers trembling as he set the pipe down, feeling the warm, damp air drifting through the window. Suppose when it was born it would be too late, too late to stop it, too late to do anything. Tuckman had been right—once it was born, it would be safe, protected by law, protected by scoffing, laughing doctors who wouldn't believe. Suppose *he himself* had been lead, controlled, directed—

AND then, like a breath of noxious air, the picture flooded into his mind, an alien picture, clear and bitter, the bleakness, the coldness of another world, a world with a dim, red, dying star, with black clouds scudding over the frozen tarn, catching on the jutting black crags, swirling with the elemental fury of bitter, deathly cold—and the people, cold-eyed, watching, lustfully watching, tensed, waiting for release from the coldness, watching with the savagery of absolute selfish ruthlessness, panting cold clouds from their not-human mouths, viciously waiting.

And horribly superimposed on that picture was a damp, humid, sickly-sweet mockery of love and affection, reeking in its very falseness, plastered on by a mind that knew no love, that could *never* know love, pleading its cause for human compassion, and lying in its teeth, a monstrous, hideous lie—

He started up from his chair, jolted, nauseated, his whole body shaking. An alien picture, thrown powerfully at his mind, promising love, unable to hide the ragged edges of its grasping ruthlessness. There was no doubt now, no possible error. The picture was too clear, too hideously clear. Urgency swept through his mind; he sent a chair crashing as he rushed to the door and tore it open, fighting the cloying, false, jasmine sweetness from the corners of his mind, and half ran down the corridor, his heart pounding with fear, knowing what he had to do, knowing that *Tuckman had been right*, so horribly right—

He reached the room finally, met the nurse in the door, saw her eyes look at him. "The woman!" He choked. "The baby—"

The nurse's eyes widened, her face white. "She didn't ring, and I didn't have time to call you. It—it just happened before I could call. You should have come sooner—"

He pitched her aside, frantically staggering as he forced himself into the room. He felt the cloying false-sweetness sweep into his mind, like a wave, pounding into his brain with wrenching

force, and with it a rotten undercurrent of savage mockery, and he threw the door wide, staring at the bed, the mother, smiling serenely, softly singing and cooing, rocking the tiny bundle in her arms—

His knees shook as he walked slowly to the bedside, staring through the murky darkness at the tiny bundle at the mother's breast. With trembling fingers he parted the blankets at the top, and blinked, and felt the sigh of relief run like a prayer through his lungs—

A sweet baby. Pink, with little golden baby fuzz on the top of its head. His fingers searched, examined—a perfect baby. Every finger, every toe. A sweet, healthy, normal baby, and the mother smiled and rocked it—

And then it opened its eyes.

Little button eyes. Pale blue, like all babies. But they were watching him, coldly. The chill ran down his legs, and his knees almost buckled. Little button eyes watching him, level eyes, malicious eyes, glaring at him, filled with raw, rank animal fury, bitter grasping hatred—*watching him!*

The shock drove through him like a lightning bolt. His mind screamed, and he wanted to scream, and couldn't. Because he knew that new-born, human babies *can't see*—can't focus, can't understand.

Light and darkness, yes, but nothing more—

And the baby glared at him with malicious little eyes, and it seemed that they were laughing at him. . . .

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CIAVA ruled the twilight people—until Theseus came out of the night

The weapon dropped as he wrestled with her

The Deciding Factor

By Paul Lawrence Payne

THE ALARM went off. It cut the circuit which powered the tape unit, and the fountain of soft music that had been showering gently over the sleeping girl stopped abruptly.

She stirred awake in the dim luminescence of the chamber, a fragile, long-limbed creature of silken skin and large violet eyes under light bronze curls. She opened sleep-drenched eyes amid the glowing shadows of familiar things, and remembered. It came to her without terror why the alarm had been hooked up, and now interrupted her slumber.

It meant that the one coded as 2M2CLX4I had entered her Division. He had come close enough for his silhouette to show on the radar, activating the alarm. There could be no doubt as to his intentions.

He was after her food.

She was not frightened. This was the Fortieth Century and fear was a word one found only in the ancient books. Fear had died long ago with the insupportable millions who had unleashed the nuclear lightnings and fouled the atmosphere with radioactive particles. Now there was only order and sanity—guarded by CIAVA, humming and clicking away in a great cube of shining granite. Consequential Integrator and Vector Analyst—CIAVA, the immutable.

And yet—she was uneasy. It was as if some part of her mind was restless, muttering unintelligible questions, awkwardly and shamefacedly offering odd, unpleasant suggestions in a voice too low to be heard . . .

She tried to throw it off. After all, the situation was simple. CIAVA had stopped the machines of 2M2CLX4I and there was nothing left for him but death. But he had refused to die. He had turned—what was the ancient word—criminal. He was actually taking the precious, regulated food of others. He had even turned violent, extending his arm toward some who had opposed him in a rapid manner, with his hand closed, imitative of an Early Age custom called punching, hurting them, discoloring their delicate skin.

BUT the worst of it was the defiance of CIAVA, the perfect machine of perfect government. Naturally, all those concerned had discussed it. She had sat at her house screens for an inter-house parley among the Dwellers of the surrounding Divisions—a rare and exciting thing. They had reached certain decisions, made certain plans, taken certain steps. He would be dealt with—logically, summarily, conclusively. There was really no cause for fear. Or even any uneasiness.

She knew what to do. Almost as if this were a commonplace in her life, she knew each step she must take—even up to the final one. It was all very simple.

She must kill him.

She lay motionless along the pneumatic cushions of her sleep-form, rehearsing her actions. Then she casually stretched a long white arm toward the house control board, resting a slim finger on the light switch, flipping it from automatic to manual.

This prevented the photocells, such as the pair beamed upon her sleep-form, from registering her movements and throwing on the house-lights before her. Thus she could now arise in darkness, slip into her one-for-alls and patter undetected through the vitreous bubble in which she lived. No one outside would know she was awake, alert to her danger, moving in anticipation. Her home would remain the same dull gray sphere in the early dawn as before.

She stood before the ground scanner and studied the three-fold screen, which she had turned down low. Quickly she picked out the wary, tentatively-stepping shadow against the background blot of the distant trees. She flicked off the other screens with a sweep of her hand. Yes, there could be no doubt. He was skirting the house at a respectful distance, heading for the Dispenser. The Dispenser, which daily issued the white odorless paste that was her food.

She turned to a wall cabinet and extracted the Weapon. As its weight came to rest in her hands, she underwent a sudden resurgence of her unease. It brought a puzzled frown to her brow.

It seemed to her she ought to understand this thing. this faint nervousness that had been growing on her the past week—ever since, in fact, CIAVA had cut off his machines and declared him surplus. She wondered if the other Dwellers felt the same inner, nameless disturbance. They had all expressed some surprise—and then their long pale

faces had fallen into the old, accustomed serenity. And why should she feel other than they? Was this not, after all, merely another of CIAVA's computations?

It could not be he she feared. He was without weapon. Such a thing as she now held—parallel copper rods and light battery fitted to an easy one-hand stock—had not existed a week ago. Nowhere, for more than a thousand years, had there been any kind of weapon at all. He had nothing but his empty, stealing hands.

Impatiently, she stepped into the exit port beam and, after it rolled silently back in its frame, moved out into the dark and chill of imminent dawn. Oh, why hadn't he accepted the decision of CIAVA and destroyed himself? Now here she was, Dweller MD3CXVI, hunting Dweller 2M2CLX4I, a man who had lived a scant hundred kilos from her and who had often, in the last thirty years, both entertained and visited her, sharing the music and ancient books and films and colorscopes with her and the other neighboring Dwellers. Although such occasions as these were infrequent—civilized people having at last learned to live apart from and independent of one another—it must, in part, be one of the reasons for her dislike of this task. It was so strange to destroy a being like herself.

SHE shivered. The dawn was still and and cold. Blueness was invading the black toward the east, a blue glowing into green along the horizon, a green that in turn held the bright promise of yellow. She moved away from the house, heading for the dim round of the Dispenser.

She hoped she would not find him there, as the others had warned she might. There was a space under the unit where he could hide, as he had when robbing the others—waiting until she had gone on her morning patrol of the Division and he could creep out and trip the controls and take her entire day's supply of food. Then she would have to go without food for twenty-four hours, as had one or two of the others—elderly 5MD2C3XI in particular. It had been hard on him.

But it would be awkward to find the hunted one there. His body, after killing, might become lodged between pump and generator, and be very difficult to move. Anyway, it would be so much better to kill him out on open ground, so much easier to dispose of the corpse. Once again, she shivered.

She saw him. The dark was fading and his shadow was distinct within the dome housing the Dispenser. He was in the act of settling himself under the converter.

Steeling herself, she stepped up to the dome. Its port was not electronically locked and operated manually. She rolled it back and said, "Come out of there."

To her surprise, he came. She stepped back from the port as he emerged. Dim as the light was, she recognized his crisp features, his natural grace, and a little pang went through her. His voice was gentle, although a trifle husky and quivering with some of the tremble that gripped the rest of him.

"What's that you're carrying?" he asked.

"I think it's called a stun-rod. Developed during World War Six. It—" The madness of so casual a conversation suddenly overwhelmed her and her next words stuck in her throat.

He nodded. "I was afraid of that." His voice grew lightly mocking. "Is this another decision of CIAVA's?"

She cleared her throat desperately. "You know CIAVA cannot make such a decision. All the Dwellers in this Sector made the decision. The two oldest Dwellers ordered some military archives from the depository and worked up several of these on their fabricator units from the ancient microprints." She had to clear her throat again and declared angrily, "What else did you expect?"

He did not answer immediately. His pale face was raised toward the stars

waning in the lightening sky. "Considering the hold CIAVA has on us all, I shouldn't have expected anything else." His voice was soft, almost a whisper. His eyes came down to her. "And now you are going to kill me?"

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "You are disturbing the technoconomic balance. You could have destroyed yourself—much more pleasantly." She lifted the weapon. "However, this will not hurt."

He laughed the word out. "Hurt!" He craned his head toward her. "How old are you? I don't remember exactly."

"Forty-seven. What has that to do with this?"

"A child," he muttered. "And it comes to you so easily. How old do you think I am?"

She shrugged. "By your code, not too much older than I am."

"I am fifty-nine."

She fingered the weapon. "You are young, for destruction. We noted that. Evidently, CIAVA's calculations are based on something beyond mere age."

"CIAVA!" he burst out, and then caught at the rage in his voice. He finished bitterly. "CIAVA is always right."

"Of course. Your motives are understood," she added coldly. "You are not two hundred years old and ready to die. Your id compels you to rebel."

"You understand *me.*" He spoke slowly, sadly. "Do you understand CIAVA?"

"That is not necessary."

"No," he murmured," not necessary. What is the population of the world?"

AT THE abruptness of the question, she blinked. "Six thousand three hundred and fifty-two." She started to correct herself, but he cut in, his smile wan in the wan light.

"Soon to become six thousand three hundred and fifty-one. The number CIAVA now deems correct, in view of its recent improvement of the telescanner." His voice took on a singsong character. "Now the area that can be patrolled in the one-hour working day is extended. It is more efficient to patrol a wider area with one gyrojet than to reduce its work by three percent, merely to keep a certain number of gyrojets in operation. The sacred balance can be maintained only by rigidly adhering to the technoconomy." He waved wearily. "It's as simple as that."

She waited. He had some right to speak. she supposed, although he was making it harder for me. The weapon had grown heavy in her hands.

"Sixty-three hundred of us, where once there were over two billion. Sixty-three hundred, and CIAVA." The bitter bark of his laugh rang out on the chill dawn air. "CIAVA, the Ultimate Calculator—King Cyberneticos itself, governing this shrunken world by the wisdom of massed banks of electronic relays, master of the machines that nourish!" He stabbed a finger at her and she recoiled instinctively, almost dropping the stun-rod. "Who's next, Number Eighteen Hundred and Sixteen? You?"

She stared numbly at him for a moment, while something slimy coiled and uncoiled within her. Then she steadied herself and snapped, "Don't be absurd! Why should CIAVA cut *me* off?"

The caves of his eyes glowed darkly in the pallid glimmer of his face. "Exactly. Why should CIAVA cut *me* off?"

She shrugged. "There can be no questioning CIAVA's judgment. CIAVA has no judgment."

He slammed a fist to his chest. "I can question CIAVA. I do question CIAVA—I, who have yet to live out my statistical span. And others will come to it, too. Others will waken to cold, dark, silent machines, will run to their Dispensers, will stare, sick and empty, at the dry spigot, will beat their hands bloody against the metal—even as I have done." He held them clenched before her. "Even as you may do."

He took a deep breath. The girl shifted uncomfortably, wondering why these furious, irrational words held her so. He went on, his voice sinking to a soft, yet savage intensity.

"Watch the population curve. Study

it. It is still declining. This is not the Twentieth Century—when millions died, starving or slaughtered, of over-population and underorganization. They fed that problem to CIAVA's ancestor, the great ENIAC—factors of resource, of distribution, of power. They got back an answer, the first extrapolated curve of birth-control. From then on they only needed to let natural death take its course. Each generation died off, to be replaced by a mere trickle of children. The economic problems dwindled—and so did the wars they caused."

"I was fully indoctrinated," she informed him coldly, "thirty years ago. This was all covered."

"But you have forgotten that we, whom CIAVA was built to serve, cannot be anything but symbols, factors, digits." He raised a trembling finger. "Last week I became a digit—to be subtracted. Natural death is no longer efficient. It cannot any longer move fast enough for CIAVA. Next week, next month—*tomorrow!*—CIAVA will effect another minor improvement, eliminate another factor, stop another set of machines. Whose?"

IN THE silence that followed she heard the shaky exhalation of her own breath. She shut her eyes involuntarily, against a sudden surging terror.

She heard the quick swish of his feet on the grass and her eyes flew open again—too late. Instinctively, she gripped the weapon's stock even as he seized its other end. With a hoarse intake of scream she leaped back, wrenching, not daring to free a hand to press the trigger grip.

He braced himself and swung her in a wide circle. Her fingers slipped off the stock and she went into a thrashing, skidding tumble. Thrown off balance himself, he staggered, flailing, and fell.

She scrambled to her feet in frenzied desperation. She lunged into him as he was striving to get up, clawing and fighting for the weapon. He held it away from her, but finally had to drop it in order to wrestle her to the ground.

They lay there, heaving, his pale face lined with stubble above hers, his eyes wide and wild. She was helpless, pinioned, and could only stare back, thinking he would kill her now.

But his eyes changed subtly. Their mad shine dimmed to a deeper glow. His face came down to hers.

At the pressure of his lips, she stiffened with shock. This was the ancient "kiss"—gross, animal, unhealthy. . . . Yet what delicious tingle was suddenly running through her—what warm and sudden tumult surging with her blood, numbing her throat?

"This, too, we have forgotten," came his choked murmur. "This was love. Thus we mated." He released her suddenly and crawled over to the weapon. She did not move while he came erect, aiming it toward her.

He smiled. The sky was bright with day beyond. His lips moved grimly. "Then they built the Inseminator, and love, sweet love became a foible of the past." He frowned down at the weapon. "How do you operate this thing?"

Her brain was whirling, but she managed to choke out an anguished laugh. "So you can kill me?"

He turned his set face toward her. "Kill you? Why?" He shuddered. "No machine dictates to me when I shall kill my fellow man. No, I only recall vaguely that these stunrods had two powers: The maximum killed, but, at half strength—" he held it toward the ground, testing the trigger grips—"it only stunned." A bush beyond him shimmered faintly, as if seen through a wave of heat. The grips clicked—once. "Ah, that's it."

Quite casually, he swung it toward her. She had time to open her mouth, but not to say, "Don't—" before hot needles swarmed over her body. . . .

* * * * *

It seemed as if the fiery needles had never stopped. She became gradually

aware of the buoyance of flight, of the bonds constricting her limbs and body. She opened her eyes to the familiar details of her own gyrojet. Its motor was thrumming hoarsely and air was thinly screaming against the hull. Fogmily, she made out the form of 2M2CLX-4I at the controls forward. The sun, now standing well above the horizon, struck into his tousled black hair and showed every stain and tear in his battered one-for-alls

The needles died to tingles. He had strapped her firmly to the deck, running the light steel webbing through the extra cleats that were set in the floor's transverse grooving. She could not see the set of all the lashing but she feared he had done the job well.

On the other hand, he could have killed her, a far surer way of preventing her giving the alarm than this. He had gone so far back to the Early Age, why hadn't he? That kiss for instance, that actual, *bacterial* joining of mouths—that barbaric stir of vestigial glands—that heady rush of blood—that—

HIS eyes suddenly met hers in the parabolic mirror over his head. They were dark and yet somehow bright. The tanned skin about them crinkled, the tanned cheeks lifted below them, and she caught a flash of white teeth.

"I'd like to thank you for sharing your morning pabulum with me," he called out, without turning his head, "but I doubt you meant to. I brought your half along, for whenever you want it." He nodded grimly. "Today we shared our food. Remember that, no matter what else happens."

"Whatever you're going to do," she said scornfully, "will be quite futile, you know. You are only prolonging your own agony."

"Agony?" He laughed shortly. "I'm beyond all that. Dear girl, I'm living! Thanks to CIAVA, I've been reborn."

"You're what they used to call insane," she snapped.

He chuckled. "To the insane, all sanity is utter madness. No, I was dead, even as you and the others, until CIAVA declared me dead. Then, like Lazarus, I arose and walked. Truly, I am alive—all over. Man does not live, except with danger. Oh, when the Dispenser ceased to ooze forth my daily dram of sweet synthetic pap, I was afraid. I laid down and sobbed and cursed. I was too young to die, yes, yes—and so forth." His face tightened. "Then I decided to live. skulking about like a beast, robbing the neighboring dispensers, shivering through the night—I found life. *Real* life."

She curled her lip. "You will die, however."

"Yes!" he shouted suddenly, defiantly. "But I shall not die for nothing, for a machine. I shall die for a purpose—my purpose, and yours, and everybody else's—to wake you all up from this stifling dream of perfection, this miasma of content and complacence, this senseless resignation to mechanical decrees. Yes, CIAVA now sentences us to death, one by one." He twisted to glare at her. "For it *has* come to that, you know."

Terror abruptly took her by storm. She could only stare back at him, trying to shrink within the straps that held her.

For a moment, it was as if he had forgotten her. His head was twisting this way and that, his dark eyes unblinkingly quartering sky and horizon. A tiny bell of hope tinkled in her mind. It was not unlikely that other gyrojets would be about, even this early.

Then he flicked on the automatic pilot and swiveled back to face her. The hard bright fire of his eyes held her helpless. "Think," he said, and was silent.

Then he resumed. "Think—back to the last birth. The infant then coded as One is now twenty-eight years old. The population of Earth was then six thousand nine hundred and thirteen. Since then— not one birth. But five hundred and sixty-two deaths.

"They were all natural deaths, of course. Old, old people, reaching two

hundred and better, drying up, purely withering away. But now. . . ." His lips thinned to a tight line. "Me. Just entering the prime of life. Sound, healthy—and *young!*

"What does it mean, my lovely young friend? What means this continuous decline of the population curve? Oh, it only averages twenty a year or so, but now it is no longer enough.

"With me—" his thumb stabbed into his chest as he leaned forward, his voice gathering intensity—"with me, for the first time, a live and healthy human being is being sacrificed—in mid-life, as it were.

"What does it mean? Is it an error?" The black head shook slowly. "No. I know, as well as any other, that CIAVA makes no errors. Cannot make errors. Then what can it mean?"

FOR a moment he paused, eying her intently. Then he went on:

"What is this goal of perfection toward which CIAVA is driving? It was built to serve us, and now we have a life of luxury, marred only by a minute detail of work we must perform. Does my death improve the lot of the rest of you significantly?

"Or, deep in its electronic heart, has CIAVA reached a conclusion we can never know? Has it decided the population must now be artificially reduced? And, if so, what *is* the goal, the perfect number of people? Five thousand? Four thousand? Two thousand? Five hundred? One hundred? Or is it—"

"Don't! Stop!" The cry burst from her before she could clench her jaws against it.

His eyebrows went up. "Ah! I touch a secret dread, perhaps? Tell me, how many of the others have become uneasy in this past week? How many have wondered that CIAVA selected me, seemingly at random? Do I alone see this new precedent? Am I the only one to suspect that the ultimate efficiency will consist of CIAVA—period?"

"CIAVA is only a machine," she said through chattering teeth. "It was your turn to die, and you know it!"

"What!" A wry mirth twisted his features. "With 6M3CL2I still alive at a hundred and ninety-three, for instance? And all those others coded in the 6M's and the 5M's, all of them at least a hundred and fifty years old? My turn?"

Frantically, she snatched at another subject. "What are you going to do?"

He swung back to the controls. "I am going to destroy CIAVA."

She lay there in the paralysis of shock, breath fluttering in her lungs. Destroy CIAVA, destroy CIAVA, destroy. . . . When she could speak her voice was thick, choked. "You can't! You *can't!*"

His reply was a short laugh.

"You will destroy us all! CIAVA controls the machines. None of us can operate them. We'll all starve to death!"

His black head shook slowly. "No. You will live. You will go 'native,' as I did. You will go to the wild earth, to the roots, and the berries, and the few things that still run or crawl or fly—"

"We'll become beasts, you mean!"

"—And you will in the meantime detach the machines and learn to run them and control them by yourselves."

"Anarchy! Chaos! Barbarism!" She flung the words like stones.

He laughed again, harshly. "Oh, some of you will die. The older and weaker. It will be a refining process. The survivors will start afresh, build a new race, free of the metallic decree—"

She clutched desperately at a new thought. She cut in, speaking with taut control of one who reasons with a dangerous maniac. "It is well known that no one can touch CIAVA. CIAVA is protected. The master switch is hidden. The circuits are sealed. The atomic generator, the repair unit, the problem enunciator—at every point CIAVA is equipped with death-dealing devices. You will only destroy yourself, as you should have, long ago." She essayed a shaky laugh. "You cannot even *touch* CIAVA!"

"I think I can," he answered soberly. "Oh, you are quite right—I shall be destroyed. But CIAVA will die with me."

"Why, why, why?" she cried. "Why destroy us all? We are not CIAVA. We did not engineer that decision."

"But CIAVA did. A thousand years ago they laid the plans of the future, and built CIAVA to compute and carry it out. They were humans and humans make mistakes. One more decimal of calculation might have avoided the infinitesimal error that has accumulated across the years, and culminated in this divergent, downward curve. I am your first revealing coördinate. You really need only me to extrapolate—to predict—to *know*—the death of the human race. If CIAVA can kill one healthy, productive person, it can kill all. It obviously—"

SHE clenched teeth and fists. "I am no longer listening. You are a raving beast. CIAVA must be wiser than we ever dreamed. CIAVA must have *known* you were fit only to destroy."

He spoke gently. "I only know that I am a man in whom the classic, ancient will to live has been subverted. And that is a dangerous factor to introduce. Once you have convinced a man that he cannot survive, he will throw away the rules and go on his own." He shrugged and chuckled wryly. "Didn't Samson pull down the temple?"

Later, she lay there thinking. He had brought the gyrojet down on the wide lawns about the building that housed CIAVA. He had come to her, looked to her fastenings. Then he had knelt and kissed her. Not the stormy, hungry crushing of her mouth this time, but only a gentle, lingering brush. There had been something like pity in his stare. Then he had smiled ruefully.

"Good-by, Ariadne. I, Theseus, go to slay the Minotaur. Let the maidens of the grove keep my memory bright. Farewell."

Lying there, she could not see him as he moved away. She strove to picture him, dwindling into the portal of that low square building. She envisioned him walking slowly into the cool dark doorway across the gleaming glass beneath which lay the faintly glowing tubes, the incredibly lacy coils, the endless ribbons of translucent tape that were CIAVA. Her heart leaped with the thought of some sudden sapphire flame enveloping him in one last stark silhouette.

Her lips moved involuntarily, shaping to a forgotten impulsion. "This was *love*. *Thus* we *mated*. . . ." (Oh, where were the others? Was no one out yet on patrol? Whose turn was it today to cover the precincts of CIAVA?) "Then they built the Inseminator and love, sweet love became a foible of the past. . . .".

She drew a deep, shuddering breath. CIAVA. Consequential integrator and Vector Analyst. A name . . . a machine . . . the Bull of Minos . . . and Theseus, pale beneath the crisp, black tangle of his hair, groping into the Labyrinth . . . Ariadne, spinning out the thread . . . names . . . or numbers—cold, cold numbers—clicking on a meter . . . the sudden roar of the surprised monster. . . .

And then something stabbed into her mind.

Frantically, her arms writhed under the light strands of woven steel, her fingers stretched to flutter over the cleats, like butterflies beating fragile wings. The clips and splices he had made in the shackles were well beyond her reach.

Nor was there any play in the cleats, any yield in the fine steel mesh crisscrossing her. Or was there?

Terribly, she strove there, under the curve of glass like some trapped thing, under the warm, climbing sun. Now straining, now exhaling and shrinking, bruising and scraping skin bred to silky fineness through centuries of mechanized tenderness—

—until at last she staggered trembling to her feet, blood staining her tattered one-for-alls, tottered to the open port of the gyrojet, stumbled over the

close-cropped sward, her heart a pounding fist, her lungs a tightening vise, toward the looming granite wall, and CIAVA.

She sagged against the cold stone of the entrance. Her eyes roved wildly, despairingly, against the gloom within. The echoes of her gasping breath came back to her sibilantly.

There was no other sound. No shadow flickered against the dark. The whole acre of glassy floor, dimly phosphorescent from the banks, tiers and rectangular grottoes of photo-cells and electronic tubes under its surface, was bare.

AWE and resurgent panic all but brought her to her knees. This was CIAVA, master of the machines that served, the frozen brain of all mankind. What was she doing here?

With a whimper she rushed across the floor, her feet whispering over the glass.

There, in the center, was a square well, set down into the great computer. It was the enunciator pit, where one could feed extraneous problems to CIAVA, and wait, reclining on a couch for the few minutes at the most it took CIAVA to digest and reply.

He was there—the outlaw! His fingers were curled like tendrils of smoke among the exposed gears and wheels of a panel he had pried open. The very air about him was electric.

She dropped to the edge of the pit. "Wait!" Her strained gasp reverberated to the distant walls.

He jerked a set face upwards. "Go away," he growled. "You can't stop me."

"No!" She stretched her arms toward him in anguish. "Into the enunciator—state it. The square root of minus one equals zero. Oh, say it, say it."

His jaw dropped. "You're the one who's insane now."

She shook her head wildly. "Ah, listen, for the love of God," she sobbed. "The two old ones. When they searched the archives, they found the record. Of the last rebel—of how he wrecked the one before CIAVA. He asked—he stated the impossible problem—he—"

Then she hung there, on the edge, supporting arms trembling, while he frowned in wonder and gathering excitement, while he turned slowly—

And uttered into the vitals of CIAVA the incredible, mathematical blasphemy.

"The . . . square root . . . of minus one . . . equals . . . zero."

Instantly, a trail of sputtering flashes raced on a slant into the wire-and-crystalline depths. Something flared wickedly far below, followed by a dull thump. Something else, unseen, began to give off rapid-fire barks, as of a snapped transmission belt.

He ran up the stairs from the pit. "We'd better get out of here."

They raced toward the rectangle of outside light. A whole square of floor went black under their flying feet.

They hurtled across the broad porch and down onto the grass—to stop there as if turned into statues.

Another gyrojet had landed beside the girl's. A stooped and elderly form was climbing stiffly down.

"He has no weapon, Theseus," said the girl coded as MD3CXVI.

The man coded as 2M2CLX4I turned slowly to look at her, ignoring the old man hastening toward them. "What did you call me?" he asked softly.

She smiled up at him. "Theseus. It's what you called yourself, isn't it?"

"Yes, Ariadne, so it is." His hand touched hers, and clasped it.

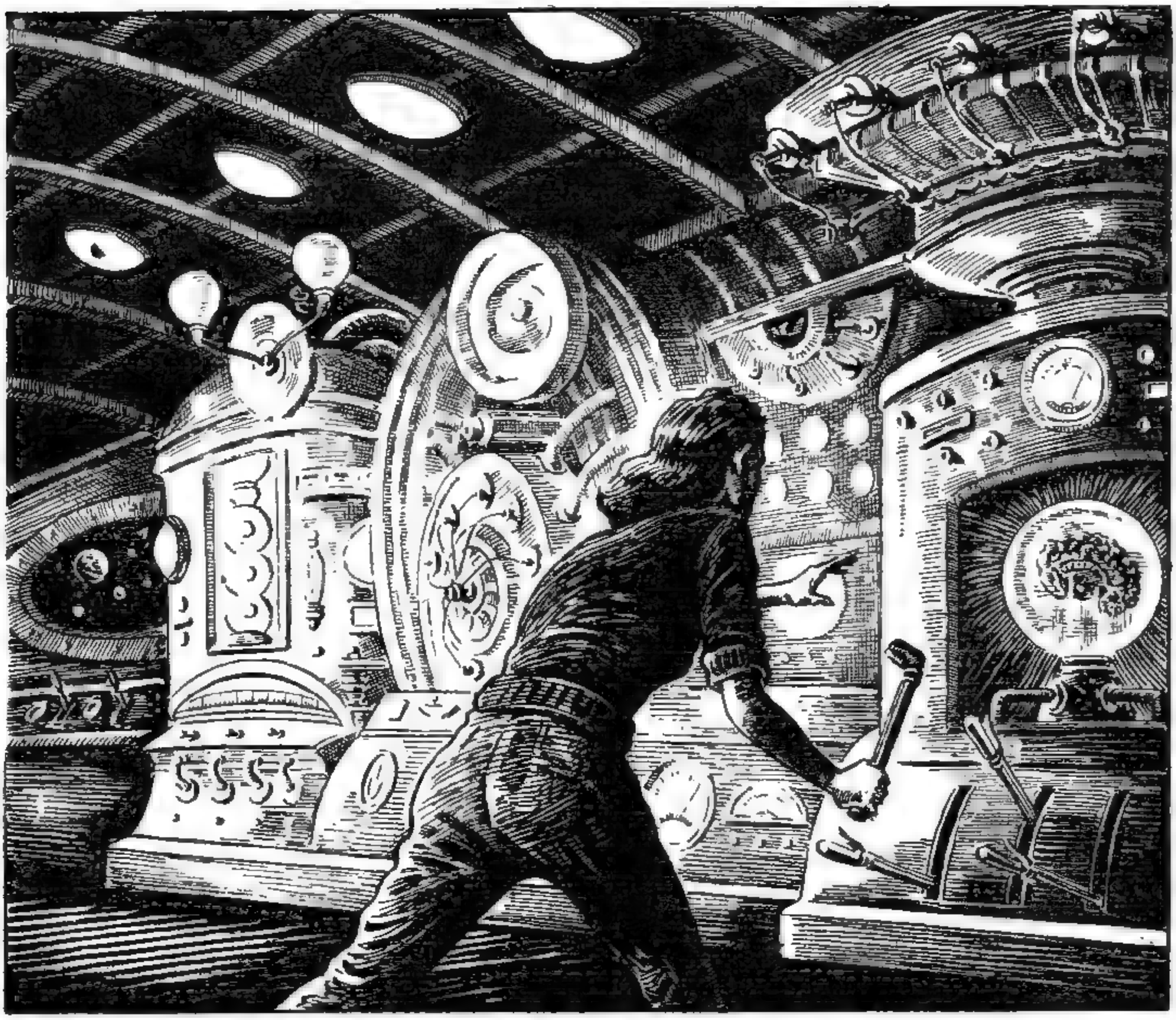
They were both smiling as the old man came hurrying and wheezing up to them. "What are you doing here—with him?" he quaveringly addressed the girl.

His wrinkled face was suddenly lit by a blue-white glare that made his startled eyes flinch. Behind the younger man and the girl there was a crash.

"What—what—" gnarled fingers crept to the old one's withered jaw, "what has happened to CIAVA?"

Theseus answered him. Throwing an arm across Ariadne's shoulder, he began to speak, slowly and simply.

"We have some good news for you...."



She raced toward the flesh-organ's housing

A Family Matter

By Walter M. Miller, Jr.

SOMEONE has awakened me. I feel darkness and a cold wind about my hull. I stand in the launching position and wait. I am waiting for the signal that will send me thundering alone into the night, toward the bright points of light that wink above me. I can see them beckoning through the eye in my prow. A voice comes to me.

"C-33 from Winnipegport Control. Greenwich time, 0655 hours. Start your jets. Prepare for blast-off. Over."

I answer with an acknowledgement signal, although I have no voice. I start

my reactors and clear my tubes, letting them heat to operating temperature. The warmth is good. It brings a faint glow to my pleasure circuits. Soon I shall be streaking starward for a journey which no human crew could long endure. This is my first solo; this is my test. If it is good, then they will reward me with sleep, and with soft dreams.

I don't know where I came from. At first I could think and remember, but I could not dream. I could not desire. I could not feel fear nor pain nor pleasantness. I was made of metal and glass and hot patterns of energy. But I was not yet complete. They gave me another part—a fragile bit of warm flesh, immersed in a globular tank of thick fluids, fed by pumps and aerators and chemical infusers, and interconnected with the part of me that is metal and glass. When I am awake, it becomes a part of my oneness. It gives me pleasure and pain. It gives me fear and desire. When I am asleep, it dreams separately of beauty.

The voice comes again. "C-33 from Control. Sixty seconds before blast-off. Am beginning time-signals. Over and out."

The signals come as radar pulses at one second intervals. I adjust my jets so that their growling thrust holds me poised feather-light—my tripod scarcely touching the ramp beneath me. A new fluid suffuses my organic unit; I feel excitement. The controls are my tense muscles. The instruments are my eyes and ears. It is good to be so strong and alert. The pulses have paused—a five second lull. Then . . . *teeeeeeet!*

MY JETS spurt fury. Nostrils breathing fire. I throw myself skyward like a handful of lightning. I *am* lightning! My power is an ecstasy! As the seconds tick away, the hot rush of air grows thinner about my body. The sudden thrust causes my flesh-organ to sag and grow dazed in its fluid, but its long presence has taught my mechanical circuits how to respond, and I can still feel elation athough the organ is half-asleep.

The time is 0702. My altitude should be 371.4 kilometers, but there is a slight negative discrepancy. Either my thrust is less than my instruments indicate, or my mass is greater than anticipated. I am pausing to cross-check all available evidence.

Now I have checked. Now I feel uneasiness. The loading-tapes are in error by seventy-five kilograms. Somewhere within my body is an unexplained object, or objects. Compared with my total weight, its mass indeed is tiny. But it is great enough to cause large errors in my course-plan. Already I have veered slightly from my line-of-thrust; the object is off-center. I use my stabilizers to compensate for its presence. I feel their feedback and know that the object lies four meters from my center-line.

I have eyes in my control room, my reactor room, and my cargo hold. I look through them—and see nothing. I am empty—no crates, no forgotten tools—only the parts that belong to my body. There is only one place that is invisible to me—a small closet just aft of the empty control room. I can see its closed door; it is where humans go for privacy when I have a crew aboard. It is four meters from my center-line. One of my ears is set within it, but the sound of my jets drowns my hearing. I am frightened. Can this be a test to confuse me? Now I must revise my course-plan!

The plan is revised. With a tiny increment of thrust, with the auto-stabilizers in constant action, and with a revised flow-velocity while in the next layer of five-space, I shall reach Argos III at the specified time of arrival. But the mystery remains. What unauthorized cargo am I carrying? I have decided that it is not a test; the off-center loading is illegal during blast-off. Even crewmen must be strapped in specified positions. My commander would not devise an illegal test.

I have scanned my memory-libraries and have extracted a list of several hundred objects, each of which could weigh

seventy-five kilograms, be motionless, and fit within the closet. But considerations of plausibility reduce the list to three possibles: (1) a dead human being, (2) six cases of whiskey for an official on Argos III, and (3) an unconscious human being.

If I do not reduce my acceleration, the list will shrink to two: broken whiskey, dead human. I find a word in my anthropo-concept vocabulary that seems to fit whatever person is responsible for this misloading. The word is "fool."

My inertia is now greater than the backward tug of Earthplanet's gravity. I am quenching my jets so that I can listen for possible sounds in the closet. For a moment, I hear nothing. I increase the pickup's preamplifier to full sensitivity.

And now . . . *I hear faint breathing!* Then a low moan! The organism is still unconscious. What am I to do? It is obviously human. I self-key a soporific fluid into my flesh-organ's bath, thereby lulling my anxiety. Shall I call back to Winnipegport? Perhaps that would bring punishment. I am supposed to be capable of solving any problem that does not involve repairing damages to my body. Unless there is an emergency. Is this an emergency?

NOW the creature moves a little. It pulls itself toward the door. I can feel the feedback from my autostabilizers; there seem to be two objects—one of eighteen kilograms, the other about fifty-seven. The larger is self-moving; but it seems small for a human. My memory units suggest the possibility that it is a female. Despite the soporific, I am terrified. The being is standing up.

I watch the narrow closet door through my control-room eye. I listen to the being's breathing. The breaths come as faint moans. The creature seems weak and exhausted. Except for the clicking of my relays, the ship that is my body is silent. I am spinning slowly about my axis to provide a slight gravity. If the animal proves dangerous, I can again pin it helplessly in place by renewing my acceleration. Nevertheless, the circuits controlled by my flesh-organ are trembling with involuntary pulses.

The latch-lock clicks. The door swings open. I see it swaying in the entrance, glancing quickly up and down the corridor. It calls weakly.

"Timmy?"

It is a female. It has stringy, gray-brown hair, and a thin frightened face. It wears the garments of a working-class male, although its hips and breasts make the pretense transparent. It has the gauntness and the slightly wrinkled skin of middle-age. After scanning again, I see that it has called the name of a male.

I have no voice. I can only speak the lovely tones of radar code, or operate a typing keyboard in my control room. She is still standing in the corridor.

"Timmy . . . can you hear me?"

I type: "You are the only human aboard. It is evident that you are stowing away on the wrong rocket. There is no 'Timmy' here."

The sound of the keyboard startles her. She gasps and steps back toward the closet. When the typing ceases, she tiptoes slowly to the entrance and peers cautiously around at the controls. Her hands are trembling. She sees the keyboard and moves toward it.

As she reads, her face tightens gradually into a tense mask. She seems to be making a grief-response. Suddenly her hands fly to her cheeks. "*Timmy!*" she cries in a kind of shrieking roar. She falls to her knees, then throws herself on the deck. She curls up on her side and sobs into her arms.

"I regret that he is not aboard," I type. "If you were authorized to board another rocket, but have simply made a human-type mistake, then I shall return you to Winnipegport, Earthplanet of Sol. If you are a stowaway, I shall act in accordance with Pan-Stellar Code."

I wait. She does not arise to read. She continues sobbing. I do nothing. The past reactions of my own flesh-organ

allow me to understand that her emotion will pass. Through the open closet door, I can see a leather bag—the other object. From past experience, I recognize it as a suitcase.

Gradually. her sobbing subsides, but she does not arise. She lies shivering. I tap an impatient rhythm in x's on my keyboard, hoping to arouse her. I have business; she detains me.

At last she pulls herself erect and sits down to read. For a moment, I fear that she will repeat the grief-response, but her shudder passes. Her dark eyes narrow; she straightens herself and sets her mouth grimly. She touches the keyboard, but I type first.

"Speak aloud, please. I have audio-pickups."

She looks around quickly. "Wh-where are y-you?" She has a rich female voice, much pleasanter than those of the male crewmen. But her question is meaningless.

"I am the being in which you are located," I reply. "I am all around you. My name is C-33. I am an M-3 express ship with Class XII neuro-cybernetic controls. Please adjust yourself emotionally to this fact."

She nods quickly. "You are Timmy!"

I PAUSE. The animal obviously thinks that someone is hiding from her. Her stupidity irritates me; but the Code requires me to be patient with humans. I type again.

"Tell me how you happened to come aboard. I must have this information in order to decide what shall be done with you."

She tosses her head defiantly. "Don't speak to me like that!" she barks. "You'll decide nothing."

"You will be treated in accordance with Pan-Stellar Code. Now please. . . ." I stop typing because she gets up and walks away from the board. She paces the floor, apparently suffering a conflict of emotions. She keeps looking about the cabin, as if searching for someone to address.

I remain silent—and uneasy. I have decided to be patient for ten minutes—no more.

"Where is Timmy, you monster?" she shrieks suddenly, crouching slightly as if to leap upon the keyboard. Of course she does not realize that I could crush her with a sudden jet-thrust.

"There is no 'Timmy' here. I find the word 'insanity' listed in my vocabunits. Are you suffering from such a malfunction?"

She steps forward to read. Her face clouds. Then she makes a small bitter laugh. "That's right, I'm insane. Insane to love anything but the State. Insane for believing that a few things should belong to *me*—and a few even to God." She finds my eye and stares into it. "Tell me, C-33. who made you?"

"You speak sedition," I warn. "But in answer to your pointless query—State made me, of course. Code specifies that no private individual or concern shall manufacture any machine or device that requires the use of processed materials. No one except State is powerful enough to make me."

"And what of Timmy?"

"I fail to understand. Who, or what, is Timmy?"

She shakes her head irritably. "You have a brain. Where is it?"

"My cybernetics circuits are scattered throughout the ship."

"The brain, the *brain!*" she raged. "Where is the flesh-and-blood brain, your mind, your soul!"

I find her concepts jumbled. Undoubtedly she is insane. But now I grasp her meaning. She means the flesh-organ that motivates me and allows me to imagine.

"The organ is behind a panel in the calculator-unit, and it is an integral part of my oneness. I fail to see. . . ."

She whirls to stare at the unit. Suddenly she darts across the control-room with a wild cry. In order to protect myself from her, I spurt a three-gravity thrust with my jets. She sprawls with a shriek and skids across the floor. I

hold her there firmly-with a continued acceleration. She is gasping and fighting to arise.

"Please . . . don't, Timmy *don't!* It hurts . . . my heart. I only wanted to look at it."

I understand pain. I am sorry she feels pain. I type: "I fail to understand your motives. But if it will please you, you may look at the flesh-organ. I must warn you however that my reaction-time is measured in microseconds. I can crush you quickly if you behave hostilely."

She hears the typing. I ease the gravity so that she can pull herelf back to read it. She nods. "I—I won't harm it. . . ."

Her face is wet as she strips away the panel. She makes sobbing sounds in her throat. So nervous are her hands that the panel slips clattering to the floor. She falls to her knees and stares inside. She remains there, frozen.

I am proud of the flesh-organ, and grateful to State for furnishing me with it. When it is inoperative, I am not myself. Without it I think, but cannot feel. And then I think only the thoughts that a human crew requires of me. Sometimes I think that it is the source of my consciousness—even though I have an independent mechanical memory that functions more efficiently than the haphazard neural circuits of the flesh-organ. Indeed, it is an important part of me. I can understand the female's interest in it. But I can understand neither her delusions nor her grief responses.

SHE has been kneeling there motionless for several seconds. She stares at the dimly illuminated globe of transparent plastic, containing the pink and wrinkled object in its warm bath of drifting fluid. Is she disappointed? But suddenly she speaks. A hollow whisper . . . but tender.

"Timmy . . . Timmy . . . twenty years it's been . . . since they took you away. Can't you remember? Please, Timmy! The doctor that delivered you . . . oh, no, you can't remember . . . or can you? They say the mind never really forgets. Timmy—try to remember being born, *try!* The pain, the bright light, fear! Oh my baby, my baby . . . listen . . . I nursed you. For two days I nursed you, before they said you had a bad heart and couldn't live . . . before they *stole* you . . . and took your brain out of your warm little body. Timmy, Timmy—how can you endure it! This monster. . . ."

The woman buries her face in her hands and makes choking spasms of sound. She is being illogical. But now I am interested. Frequently I have wondered about the organ's origin. It was obviously not *manufactured* by State. I am pleased to learn that it is human; State must think highly of me.

But the kneeling animal is guilty of a fallacy. She is considering the organ as apart from the rest of me. I am one. Assuming that my consciousness derives originally from the brain of her whelp, I am nevertheless C-33. This body is the only one I have known. The organ's functions have adapted to the ship's senses and the ship's muscles. I am proud of my body. It disgusts me that this creature should think differently.

"Get up," I type. "I assume now that you are a stowaway. Code states that if a stowaway is discovered, the ship shall continue according to the flight-plan and shall deliver the stowaway to the human authorities at the destination port. I am sorry for your sake that this is a test-flight." I wonder if it would be wise to tell her that the flight will involve accelerations of ten gravities sustained for hour-long periods. Even my own flesh-organ becomes weak from the ordeal, although it is specially protected.

The woman hears the typewriter. She looks around suddenly. Her haggard face becomes radiant. The fool! She thinks I am Timmy. She thinks I am answering her plea. She hurries to the keyboard.

"Fool!" I add as an afterthought.

Her eyes go wild suddenly. She shrieks with hysterical laughter. "Code . . . you speak to me of *Code!* Timmy, my little

boy! Now hear *this* Code—*"Thou shalt honor thy father and thy MOTHER!"* She darts to the manual control panel. She seizes a heavy crank-lever and races toward the flesh-organ's housing. Evidently she means to destroy it.

I regret that I must cause her pain.

I breathe hard on my forward jets to throw her back. She lurches across the room and falls against the control-panel. I don't want to kill her deliberately.

She is tugging herself to her feet. I increase the thrust slightly to keep her pinned down.

She saw the thrust-dial move!

"No! NO!" She is trying to override me on the controls! She twists and jerks and batters at the delicate dials!

I throw every ounce of thrust into the jets — straining the very hull of my body.

I see her crash across the room and batter sickeningly against the bulkhead. I look away.

Pain, terrible throbbing pain. It lances out from my flesh-organ to pervade my circuits. I am dazed. For an instant the force reached twenty-five gravities. Now the jets are silent, but the pain persists.

I look toward my flesh-organ's housing. The fluid bath has become crimson —the color of the stuff on the floor and on the bulkhead. My organ has ruptured —or one of the fluid-vessels that feed its inner structure has broken. I wonder . . . if they will give me another one . . . but would I have the same consciousness then?

Who am I?

I think I am going to sleep. I am certain of it. But I need to revise the flight-plan now.

I am off-course. . . .

But I am growing lazy. I am indeed asleep. No one has commanded me to revise the flight-plan. Indeed I was commanded to follow it.

Now I don't care. I shall follow the plan in my memory units. It will take me to nothingness. But now I don't care. I have no fear. I have no desire.

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COSMIC ENCORES

(Continued from page 6)

issue, from Bill Tuning, has a word or two to say about Merwin—and other things.

DEAR HEARTS & GENTLE PEOPLE
by Bill Tuning

Dear Sam: With FSM Sam, you are beginning to bring out the better items of stf which present intelligent literature, instead of the balderdash you used to print. One of your earlier blurbs went, "These strange little men came up out of the earth —and wielded a power that was mighty enough to destroy the world of humanity." As I recall there was a tale which was titled *The Ambassador's Tomcat*, but now you, Sam, since the publishers kicked old hack Merwin, have improved. Don't misunderstand me about Merwin—he can write pretty good material, but he makes a helluva poor editor.

I lay odds that you get at least ten thousand postcards, even telegrams, with the maudlin comment, "Gadzooks! I just *loved* SLAN (slobber!)," but that's all. These drooling individuals neglect to mention why they like SLAN, but I won't. (Bet you wondered why I was writing anyway.) Van Vogt is the only writer I know of who is capable of writing a story with an intelligent enough integration of intellectual complexities to command my full atention in order to unravel the plot. In SLAN, for instance, van Vogt presents an all too true picture of what happens when homo sapiens is presented with a being or class of beings, even other humans, who possess the qualities which they point with pride to as distinct traits among all humans—those of open mindedness, tolerance, intelligence, and all the nobler instincts. Homo sapiens, the dear fools that they are, proceed to exterminate the class of beings who have the characteristics which they wish but do not have, to remove their feeling of guilt at not being capable of equaling the mutants. However, as van Vogt points out, the mutants (or possibly aliens) will win over the grosser stupidity of the humans. Although it is true that SLAN isn't the best piece of work van Vogt has ever done, it must be remembered that it was written a long time ago, with consideration to technical development

Speaking of intelligence, I am aware of von Seibel's whole insidious plot to slink into fandom, and I must admit it is a brilliant one, and has worked very well so far, but it's going to get a bit tiresome after a while. Then you'll be out in the cold again Ed. Incidentally, Sam, I used to correspond with Seibel, but I began to get tired of his raving tirades (as I suspect you have), and told him what I thought about his bellowings, so he quit writing. Now Seibel gave the impression of being a very intelligent lad as far as I was concerned, and I would have enjoyed writing to him if every other word hadn't been meaninglessly exacerbating, but I think he has belied his intelligence by refusing to write to me, because I expressed a mild dislike at being the object of all his squawks. But as you say he may be becoming kind in his old age. If so he might answer my last letter.—*811 N. Milpas, Santa Barbara, California.*

Here, here, what's this between you and Merwin? Thought you loved the lad. He did print a lot of stories you screamed for—the real oldies —is that gratitude now? I'm just less obliging. Hope you and Seibel can get together, you deserve each other. That sure was a tactful approach toward making it up with him, Bill. The way you tee off on Blish, Merwin, Seibel or anyone handy, I begin to wonder about your future. Better keep in touch with us, boy.

FAVORITE SON
by Gilbert E. Menicucci

Dear Sam: If FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE keeps giving out with stories like DAWN OF FLAME and THE BLACK FLAME by Stanley G. Weinbaum and SLAN by A. E. Van Vogt it'll be in top place in my list of favorites. In the last few issues Fantastic Story Magazine has been getting better and better. It's astounding the way it has been improving.

But now for a closer look at the stories. DAWN OF FLAME and THE BLACK FLAME by Stanley G. Weinbaum was very good. The art in that issue was good as a whole. Other than the two stories by Weinbaum in the spring issue the magazine limped its way along. SLAN by A. E. Van Vogt in the summer issue was just too good for words! That's the kind of story anybody would like. I've only read one other story by Van Vogt. It was THE WORLD OF A, and it wasn't as good as SLAN. THE HOUSE ON THE VACANT LOT by Mari Wolf was good But was it necessary to make it so long? It was also juvenile. But it was good. IT'S A DOG'S LIFE by Larry Clinton was fair As for SOMETHING BORROWED by Daniel Keyes, Ug! THE VEIL OF ASTELLAR by Leigh Brackett was good, but not as good as most of her stories LUNAR PARASITES by Raymond Z. Gallun was also good.

Every or almost every letter in the summer issue had something about sex in it so I'm going to be different.

Well that's about all this time.—*675 Delano Avenue, San Francisco 12, California*.

The discussions about sex have a humorous overtone you may not know about, Gil. Some of the fans scream like mad about sex in the stories and illustrations, then they send their fanzines for review and—sure 'nough—nekkid women all over the place. Anyway, thanks for being different.

FAILURE PROOF
by Richard C. Spelman

Dear Editor: If you continue to publish such novels as THE EVENING STAR, THE CONQUERORS, and Stanley Weinbaum's dualogy (not in my dictionary, but I like the word), THE DAWN OF FLAME and THE BLACK FLAME I don't see how you can fail. I would like to see you publish some of Robert E. Howard's, Kull; Solomon Kane or Conan stories. These stories are very similar in style to the two Weinbaum stories in the last issue.

Several of the covers have no name of the artist on them. I suggest that the cover artist be menioned on the title page I am usually curious to know, even though the cover never makes the difference between my purchasing your magazine and not. In my opinion you have not had an outstanding cover yet. In most of them you have had a surprisingly scantily clad woman, while the men are completely covered, except for the head and hands. This seems to be self-contradictory and an otherwise excellent cover becomes average. The Winter, 1952 is an example of this difficulty.

I see that SLAN is your choice for the Summer issue. As this has recently been reprinted, it is a poor selection. There must be many other excellent stories which you could have used which have not yet been published in hard covers, outside of the many anthologies which are flooding the field now. —*Leverett D-34, Cambridge 38, Mass*

The names of the artists are going on the contents page, as you may have noticed already. As to SLAN, we were aware that it had been done in hard covers, but do not consider that makes it a poor choice. We are giving the opportunity to read SLAN to thousands of readers who could not, or would not, lay out a couple of bucks for a hard cover book. Furthermore, the magazine version is always more interestingly illustrated and attractive. To a real collector, the Finlay illustrations for the story were more than worth the price of admission alone.

DESPERATION
by Norman Clarke

Dear Mr. Mines: I read Donald Allgeier's letter in the Summer issue with interest. He mentioned one story—"Electropolis" by Otfried von Hanstein—which I am dying to read.

I have seen the issue in which it appeared in a second-hand bookstore, but the magazine was in such horrible condition, and so many pages were missing, that nothing intelligible could be read. To

[*Turn page*]

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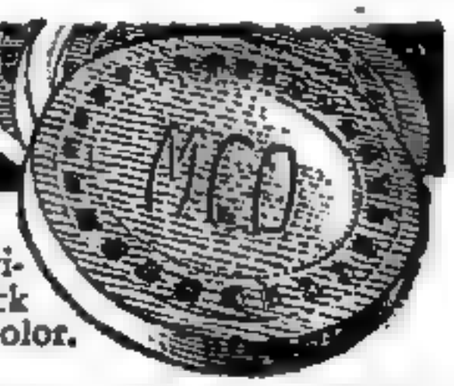

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my desperation, I could find no other copy of that particular issue.

"Electropolis," I am sure, would be an excellent reprint.—*2328 Pine Street, Seaford, L. I.*

Can't give you an off-the-cuff answer as to whether we are likely to reprint ELECTROPOLIS or not, but I hope this letter brings you a copy, or an idea where you may get one which will at least keep you from dying until somebody gets around to reprinting it.

A MATTER OF OPINION
by Klaus Kaufman

Dear Editor: I have before me the Summer Fantastic Story . . . this year's greatest. I thought you had the perfect mag after reading the well-balanced Spring issue, but the Summer . . . here is laughter, drama, adventure.

SLAN is adventure. This has become a classic only because of its tremendous plot. Actually the plot is not as dynamic as the idea. This was my first reading. Certainly Van Vogt's greatest . . and well remembered.

THE HOUSE ON THE VACANT LOT by the way I'm not rating in order of preference. This is I suppose laughter, and yet . . . Well, in any case, a great story. Is this her first?

IT'S A DOG'S LIFE, this IS for laughs. I really had a fit reading it.

SOMETHING BORROWED, something seemed missing in that ending. We want a sequel! How about it?

THE VEIL OF ASTELLAR, this is drama. Leigh Brackett at her best. In the beginning I found it hard to read, but as it developed it certainly improved and reached a shattering climax. However those last few sentences could have been more dramatic

LUNAR PARASITES is adventure. But, can't you dig anything better out of the files. Or was this just a filler?

This issue cover: TERRIF. GREAT. I think you should stick to interplanetaries by Schomburg. His pic for Clinton's epic was very good. Gullun's tale, poor as it was, received a poorer pic by Orban. Keyes' tale deserved better than the one given by Dreany. I gather Orban drew the Brackett pic., twernt so hot. What happened to Virgil? Certainly best in the mag but he's done better. I see the art wasn't so hot except on he cover.

How about some advances on some future tales? More Hamilton, Brackett, and any others you can dig up. I, however, do not share the great enthusiasm most readers have for Kuttner. I certainly loathed his recent masterpiece (?) in SS. However, it's a matter of opinion.—*1 Water St., Newburgh, N. Y.*

P. S. My opinion may change with A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER. I'll let you know.

Our head is too firmly attached to be turned by all this flattery. Should be polite to you after that, but egad, Kuttner is one of our favorites. Write us again.

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW
by Doug Stitch

Dear Editor: First of all may I congratulate you on your reprint work, which I have followed since the first issue of STARTLING STORIES.

The only complaint I have is when you reprint stories from STARTLING in FSM and WSA. Personally I would like to see some of the older stories such as THE TIME STREAM, DAWN TO DUSK, FLIGHT INTO SUPER-TIME, THE ELECTRONIC SIEGE, MYSTERY OF PLANET DEEP, WAR OF THE PLANETS, STONE FROM THE MOON, BRIDGE OF LIGHT, etc.—*11 Amelia St., Toronto, Canada.*

For reply, see this or any other issue of FSM. We are still reading, anytime we come across one of the real oldies which still reads well we'll be glad to use it. We're trying to give you *good* stories, not just good and old stories.

MISSING PERSONS BUREAU
by George Stevens

Dear Ed.: Three cheers for your Summer ish.

The first cheer is for the cover, second only to the last ish. Wow, Schomburg sure can draw. My only suggestion is that you have the cover illustrate some scene from one of the stories. The second cheer is for the interior illustrations. The best ones were Finlay's for "Slan" and the one for "The Veil of Astellar." Who did it?

The third but not the last cheer is for vV's terrific story, "Slan." It's the best story you've ever published and one of the best I've ever read. This beats "Exile of the Skies" and the Flame stories It was good because it started off exciting and ended up just as exciting.

Here's how I rate the stories:

1 SLAN —need I say more?
2 THE VEIL OF ASTELLAR -one of Brackett's better ones.
3 LUNAR PARASITES—seems the new stories can't match the old ones.
4 THE HOUSE ON THE VACANT LOT—pretty good but overshadowed by Slan.
5 SOMETHING BORROWED—New touch added.
6 IT'S A DOG'S LIFE—Didn't care much for his "No Dipsy for Dix" (Aug. 51 TWS) either.

It was a very good ish though, and I hope you keep up the standard.

Here's a question I would like answered. Are Kuttner and Hamilton one and the same, and is McDonald also Kuttner? I'm still waiting for you to go bi-monthly, so hurry it up, huh?—*1608 West 28 Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.*

[*Turn page*]

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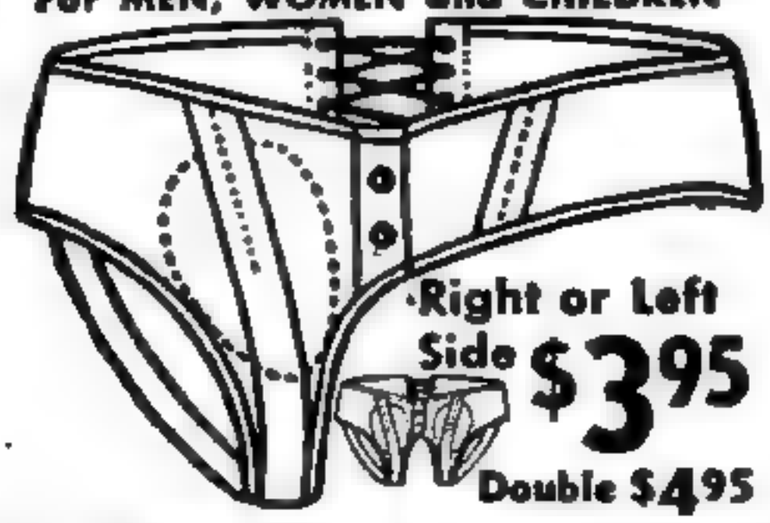

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No, Kuttner and Hamilton are not the same. And which MacDonald do you mean? If John D. he is quite a distinct and separate personality. If Anson, he is Heinlein.

It was Orban who did the illo for THE VEIL OF ASTELLAR.

Happy now that we're bi-monthly?

COLLECTOR'S SPREE
by Larry B. Farsace

Dear Mr. Mines: I am so glad you have reprinted SLAN, especially with such memorable illustrations by Alex Schomburg and Virgil Finlay, and complete in one issue.

Originally, I read the novel as a serial many years ago, but have since forgotten all details of its amazingly and dynamically interwoven complications, over the period of a decade. That's one of the main reasons I was happy to have my memory refreshed; and now that I have read it again, I can only marvel that it was possible to forget such a dynamic materialization of an envisioned future.

For dynamic is the only word I can think of to most adequately describe Van Vogt's writing style here. It certainly is not poetic as contrasted with a David Keller or Weinbaum style. Yet it is throbbing with the same vitality that one gets from witnessing a hurtling metal raindrop of steel that is a space ship into the void. As such, it might be termed the poetry of the future.

Incidentally; wasn't there an exclamation mark after the title of SLAN, as originally published? The rereading of SLAN, and consequent rediscovery of the amazingly tied-up intricacies of the plot, also brought to mind a possible reason for the prevalence of so many fanmags in our field (such as my own GOLDEN ATOM of years ago).

Could it be that fans who are so active are the same ones who have as poor a memory as what I have just alluded to, in my own instance? As a consequence, they need the aid of their own written notes, correspondence on stf, comparisons, reviews, and the consequent publishing of fanmags, to more intimately recall the finery of the better stf. stories they have just read?

I certainly hope your last published letter, of mine will aid materially in my revived collecting spree. I have a notion it will! Therefore, I would also like to mention a few more titles I would like to obtain or find out about sometime. These are, as follows: "Within the Earth-Atom," a four-part serial, "The Betelgeuse Express"; "Man in Year Million," by H. G. Wells, originally printed in Pall Mall's Magazine and, I believe, never reprinted in this country; and "Chase of the Golden Meteor," by Jules Verne, which I understand has never been translated. I am also interested in the original publication of George Allan England's "Nebula of Death," as well as fanmags published for such events as the Philcon, Denvention, Nolacon, etc. I am only interested in one of each, however, so first come, first served.—*187 North Union Street, Rochester 5, New York.*

We've accused fans of a lot of things in the short but hectic period we've been ducking

their missives, but having a poor memory was not one of them. In fact they've got memories that would make an elephant turn over in his grave. It's possible SLAN originally had an exclamation point after it, but I don't have the original at hand and can't tell you. The fans will though, you can count on it.

BEMS FOR LUCK
by Ronnie Combs

Dear Sir: I have plowed through a great many Science Fiction magazines before writing this and looking at the letter columns.

I have come to the conclusion that I can't say all the clever things they can (in particular one in the last issue of your magazine about you being a dinosaur or something, with a long tail that ought to be cut off) however, I hope my letter, witless as it is, will be welcomed.

I am a very new but very interested reader of science fiction.

I was introduced to it by my brother who said it was a good form of reading.

So, on his sayso, I went to the store to buy a magazine and found some, with a great many pictures of half-naked women being choked to death by every conceivable sort of monster.

Horrified I went to the nearest library and asked for Science Fiction. The librarian gave me some books by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells.

I enjoyed them extremely and so, decided to take a chance on the magazines.

I found the magazines almost as good as the books. Of course I found a great deal of trash depending entirely on sex for its appeal.

But there were also good stories with real plot. Now I am not an objector to sex when it has a place in the story and aids the plot but some of these warmed over "true confession" stories replotted on Mars with a few bug-eyed monsters thrown in for luck—? This you call Science Fiction??

But what surprised me most was some perfectly respectable magazines with marvelous stories in them every month had a picture of an almost nude woman on the cover!

Of course I am new at this, there may be a perfectly good reason but if there is I can't see it.

I much appreciate your magazine because it reprints the old stories. The classics. In this way, I, a new reader can find some stories I have been missing.

Would it be possible, I wonder, to re-print some of the old, out of print, Jules Verne stories?

Certain ones which I have heard of, such as *The Green Ray*, *The Career of a Comet*, and others can't even be gotten at a library!

I hope this would be possible but even if you can't do it keep up the good work.—*R. R. 14, Box 395, Cin. 11 Ohio.*

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FAVORITE LITERATURE
by William Flood

Dear Sam: I've never had the inspiration to write to FSM before, but the Spring ish was all it took. It's too bad that Stanley Weinbaum isn't around any more. His stories THE DAWN OF FLAME and THE BLACK FLAME were terrific. I have only one complaint about the Schomburg cover. It was beautifully done but it didn't have anything to do with the stories.

There's quite an argument about which is better, old or new science fiction. Personally, I don't care if it's old or new, it is still science fiction and that's my favorite literature.—*49 Corona St., Dorchester, Mass.*

You know, if we keep on the way we are going, it's likely to become our favorite literature too. Unless the letter columns nose it out. So there you have it, gang. Happy reading. We'll be seeing you.

—*The Editor*

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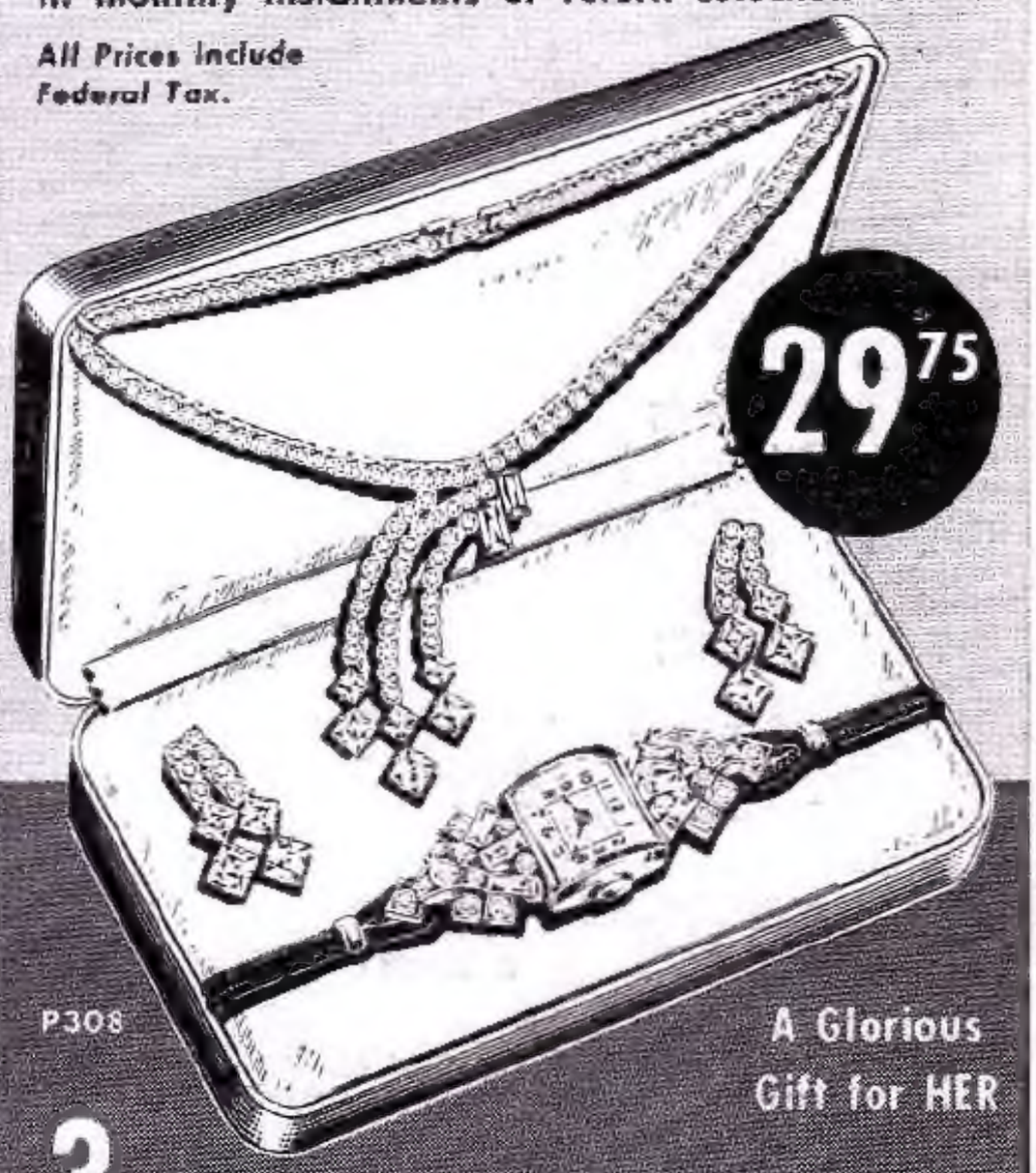

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